

Sojourn in St. Martin

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WHILE on tour we all desire to keep the record of the most important experiences, if not of the whole journey. But how reliable are the still photographs or videos as documents of the real place and experience. The question is a legitimate one. My experience has taught me that all secondary sources like photographs or stories are nothing more than distant echoes of the real sights and sound of a place.

Before starting off for St. Martin I was exposed to both still images as well as animated words by the eloquent participants of the kite festival who heartily expressed their experience of the last year, but that did not prepare me for what lay ahead. Prior to setting foot on the actual island I thought my exposure had helped me visualise the place in my mind. However, once I found myself in St. Martin I discovered that the picture of my mind did not match with the real island. I came to the realisation that reality is all together different matter, it can only be interpreted through words or with the help of modern gadgets like still or video cameras. However, as I, with my wife Shirin, set foot on the sandy shore of St. Martin for the first time, we felt happy to be carrying a still camera. The desire to keep record is a strong one, no matter how incapable the end results might seem in duplicating the real experience.

The huge ship that carried us from Teknaf reached the shore at mid noon. The sun blazed as if there was no tomorrow, and those who had sandals as footwear had to bear the brunt of the hot sand once they landed on the shore. As I had shoes on the parched sand had no effect on me. My sandalled companions too were untouched. They were putting up a brave face; perhaps the joy of landing on the island was enough to offset the discomfort.

As we crossed the beach we were welcomed by the shop owners who were offering freshly cut watermelons. As we sat under the thatched shade of the shops and looked for our means of transport, I discovered that the road that started from the end of the beach is swarmed with only one kind of variety -- rickshaw-van. The ride in one of those vans was not a novel prospect. As Dhakaites, many of us have already been forced to go through a similar exercise at least once in our life during *hartal* hours. If the vehicle was a familiar one, the ride too at first was something of a let down. St. Martin looked like a familiar Bangladeshi village with Mufassil-like patches thrown here and there. The only novelty was in the form of intermittent *keya* bushes; they lined the concrete road that was leading us from the eastern part of the island to the western shore.

As we came to an opening the sea revealed itself through the thickets a little further away on our right. The rickshaw-van halted in front of a couple of thatched stationery shops. Right next to them stood a bland three-story building suitable for being the residential hostel for our *jawans* (personnel) of the law enforcement agency. It was the resort we were to spend the four days that we had planned to stay in the island of St. Martin. I found out later that the modest building was first built as a hurricane shelter and then had been transformed into a resort.

Although the holiday season was near its end, rooms were unavailable at first. We were promised separate rooms for each family after two o'clock, which is the time the boarders leave. This tour was planned by Manik bhai; it was his job to book the rooms in advance. He was leading a group of three families and three male friends that my wife and I were a part of, and he booked two rooms in advance and the ladies and the men had to part to go into separate rooms to change into more comfortable garb. In the men's room with the rest of the five gentlemen I made an effort to feel at home. As I waited for my turn to shower, I realised that everybody else was in a hurry to go out on the beach. So, I had to be the last man to get the chance to wash myself.