

Star WOLIDAY



DHAKA SUNDAY MARCH 11, 2007

PACKAGE TOURS



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MALAYSIA



KAPTAI - 1

Hornbill's way

"AH, we will have a nice night," Khasru scanned the sky above and said.

A half-moon was hanging out there, pale and almost translucent against the deep blue afternoon sky. Still looking sleepy, waiting to wake up but unable to make up its mind. The cool winter breeze whipped our face. Long shadows of the teak and shal trees lay lazily on this hilly precipitous road. On our right and left, the green-canopied hills looked like some giant prehistoric lizards sucking up the last rays of the sun.

On this lonely road to Kaptai, we felt a strange kind of lightheartedness, like feather. The Karnaphuli river was just below us winding through the hills. On this afternoon, it looked green and languid. Its green almost like jade, you look at it and you feel lost. And the water was so still, only the winter breeze created some small ripples.

We stopped the car and walked to the edge of the road to look at this breathtaking scene. The sun-dappled hill slopes glimmer, the crevices create deep dark patches -- they created a new dimension of silence and loneliness. Nothing moved on this winter afternoon. As if this whole mountain range was in a deep slumber.

Suddenly, myriad rays broke out, almost blinding us. The sun had set a little and broke the cover of the great tree we were standing under. The rays like celestial ropes reaching out to us to steal our souls and hearts.

The forest bungalow looked like a white egret perched on top of a hill. A modern two-storey affair. Our car whined as it struggled up the steep approach. It is always an elating experience when you reach a place for the first time to stay. You have a lot to discover, a lot to expect. An empty place waiting for guests. Your voices echo around and the smell of emptiness fills up your lung. You can feel the past and the future, but never the present.

The bungalow has a huge veranda, open on all sides and then a big open deck like a terrace. We walked down to the edge of the roof and then held our breath. Straight below us flowed the Karnaphuli, tranquil and tortuous. Like a blue ribbon, I would say. And straight ahead us was a hill range. In

this fast dying afternoon light, the forest edges looked ragged like a saw's. And this whole scene was washed with that unmistakable

sunset light of orange hue. On the left, the river had vanished between two hills after taking a left turn. On the right in the yonder, we could make out the



shape of the Kaptai dam.

A sampan was approaching leisurely from the bend. Then it stopped on the opposite side of the river. An engine boat pattered along to vanish in the bend. And then just the hills, river and ourselves. Suddenly, a flash of white wings broke this serenity. Five egrets came flying low over the river in their leisurely way. Their wings causing small ripples on the water. They settled on the bank opposite us. Their white bodies reflecting on the green water. A page from the Japanese calendar created in front of us. We watched them in unfathomed wonder. We were here in search of a bird. Somebody told Khasru that hornbills were sighted in Kaptai a few years ago. It immediately struck us as a new idea to look for the bird, now extremely rare in Bangladesh. Would we have the luck to see the hornbill, we wondered. We were now climbing up a small hill through thick forest. We could see the small puffs of dirt rising up with our steps. The dirt path ends to concrete stairs rising steeply up. At 120 feet, our calf muscles started trembling with stress. We panted for breath. Then we reached the top to discover what the path led to -- a tall watchtower overlooking the hills and the forest top. It took the last drop of energy out of us as we crossed the last rung of the ladder to reach the platform at the top. We looked around and held our breath. It was now quite dark -- the sun had set a few minutes ago. But the sky, a blue deeper than before, was illuminated in crimson and violet across the east and reflected on the river like a ribbon of red. The treetops looked like some strange animals with scraggy fur, ready to prowl in the descending dark. We looked up at the heavens, the stars are coming out in ones and twos. And then darkness suddenly dropped like a curtain in a cinema. We were standing in silence, still dazed by the ephemeral display of colour. Crickets were chirping in sharp shrill voices from trees. Slowly we climbed down and were walking and then stopped to realize why Khosru said in the afternoon we would have a nice night. The forest was now awash with moonlight. Suddenly the grotesque trees had turned into enigmatic

women, their tops flooded with milky white and dark patches below. They looked like some veiled women, all standing still for a mysterious reason. As if they had turned into stones by a curse. We could feel their breathing. We could feel the whole forest pulsating with a hidden energy. We were caught in an enchanted world. We walked on like some enchanted souls and found a small gap between the thick forest trees. It had gone straight down into some dark chasm. From here it looked like the gaping mouth of a monster. We stepped into that strange path and were immediately transported to another magical world. The moonlight seeping through leaves and branches had created an intriguing pattern on the ground. We looked up and saw the moon coldly shining up there. It looked strangely exposed against the cloudless night sky. We could feel the moonlight falling in patterns on our faces. We looked at each other and discovered an unimaginable beauty -- faces turned into delicate laces woven by silver moonlight. We looked like some frescos on relics, from lands long forgotten. We were walking down like some enchanted souls, pushing deeper and deeper into the forest. We were now in a ravine, the trees making up the walls. Branches brushed our faces, we stumbled on crooked roots jutting out from the ground. We could hear small animals scurrying away by our presence. We could hear noises that we could not identify nor could we describe. But nothing mattered to us any more. We only followed the moonlight pattern on the forest floor. We followed our own long shadows

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Story : INAM AHMED
Photo : TOWFIK ELAHI
Courtesy : Forest Department



CATEGORY
FAMILYTRIP

Kaptai is situated in the southeast corner of the country and is about 400km from Dhaka. Road condition is good.

Tips for tourists
The area is malaria prone and tourists are advised to carry mosquito repellant to be applied four times a day. Low quality hotels are available. Try to eat only freshly cooked food. Foreign tourists require especial permission from the foreign ministry to visit the area.

THINGS
TOCARRY

- Binoculars
- Light-soled shoes
- Flash light
- Camera
- Sun hat
- Sun screen lotion

TRIPCOST

Microbus A/C, 7-seater for three days @ Tk 1800 per day Tk 5,400
Fuel Tk 6,000
Food Tk 7,000

