

Star



## HOLIDAY

DHAKA SUNDAY MARCH 25, 2007

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**THAILAND**



KAPTAI - 2

## Hornbill's way

**W**AKE up! Look at the sight outside," somebody tucked at my jacket.

Slowly I opened my eyes, they focused on Khosru's.

"It's Japanese painting! Look at the miracle," he sounded excited.

I glanced sideways to the window, but my vision got stuck in a milky whiteness. There's nothing to see. Slowly I crawled out of the warmth of the blanket and stepped outside. A thick mist greeted me and the unmistakable fragrance of morning dews filled up my lung. But where had the hills and the river disappeared? It seemed the scene we viewed yesterday never existed, they were just a beautiful dream we woke up from to another one now. I went to the edge of the roof and looked down, the bungalow seemed to be suspended in the cloud. The mist was falling in tiny flakes, almost like snowfall.

You raise your head skyward and you can feel their soft landing on your face. I was then seized by the momentary impulse of jumping into that soft

milky cloud and float.

But then another amazing transformation started happening. Through the mist started coming out mysterious shapes. The hills and the trees were materializing in front of our eyes. The panorama became the canvas of traditional Japanese painting. The silhouettes of the pointed hills and the scrappy tree branches kept on changing as new layers of mist wiped out the canvas. They reappeared a few minutes later in another shape -- a new painting was being drawn. The taped river appeared once, looking like a dull twig and then vanished.

We were watching this amazing show of nature's painting until the sun burst through the mist and a blue rock thrush settled down on a branch hardly 20 feet away from us. With its round black eyes and stretched deep blue neck, the bird watched us curiously before it flew away.

It was getting late and we had a long list to do. We remembered that our first

mission in Kaptai is to spot the hornbill.

"Indian pied hornbill is a endangered bird," Khosru said at breakfast table and opened the IUCN's Red Data Book. A big black bird with white streaks on its wings and sides stared at us. Its long and strong bright yellow bill looked funny with a casque on top. "You can find a very few of them in Sri Mongal and the Chittagong Hill Tracts."

"I think we are going on a wild geese chase here," I said. "It is madness to walk through forests in this vast area in the hope of spotting a bird."

"Maybe. But let us try," Khosru said and hitched up his rucksack to hit the trail.

As our car crossed the Kaptai Dam to the opposite side, I cocked my ears to hear the noise of power generation. I was disappointed. It could as well be anywhere on earth, just a wide concrete road and the drying up Karnaphuli on the other side. Still, I stood there for some time and then I could feel that distinct but very feeble hum coming up from somewhere

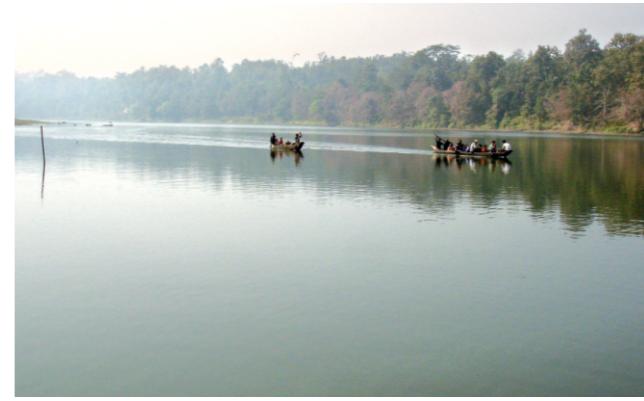
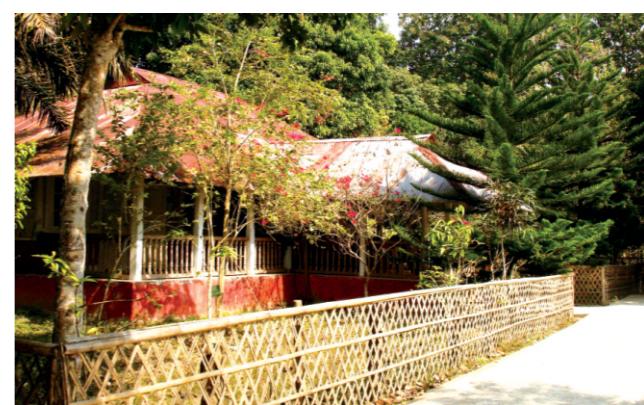
deep below -- the turbines operating. Or the bemoaning of the thousands of indigenous people who were made homeless by this hydro electric project back in the 1960s? The discontent that later led to a long bush war?

We left the dam behind and went on a tortuous road until we reached the forest office by the Karnaphuli. Here the river had widened to the deep forest on the other side. The leaves of the Zarul trees had turned flame red before they would drop down. It all looked so serene and different that I could as well be looking down at the Potomac river. In long and narrow boats, Murmas were rowing down to the market with chickens, gourds and pumpkins. And there was a boat ambulance taking a sick Murma woman to the Sadar hospital. This is a Murma land, I remembered.

We crossed the road and walked for miles through the thick of the forest. The thick trees had towered into the sky. Some of them were thicker than six of us put together.

"These are 110 years old trees," a forest officer mentioned.

Khosru was busy with his binocular looking for the hornbills. "If the hornbills are at all in this corner of the hill tracts, they would be here. This is the most ideal place. Look at the thick and tall trees. Perfect places for hornbills to nest," Khosru was saying as we walked. These amazing birds bore holes into the trees to lay eggs. When time comes for laying eggs, the female hornbill enters the hole and molts its feathers to make a safe place for eggs. The male partner then brings in mud and covers up the entrance to the nest, leaving only a small opening so that predators cannot get at the hatching bird. The male bird brings in food for his partner until the eggs are hatched. And then the female hornbills breaks open the mud shield to emerge into the wilderness again.



We walked for hours through the ups and downs of the hills, from one meander of the river to another, and strained our eyes from looking through the binoculars. On this winter day, we were all in sweat and yet the elusive hornbills were not to be seen.

Finally, we arrived at an old tin-shed bungalow -- the century old forest guesthouse built by the British. Despite its age, the structure looks strangely strong. Bang opposite the bungalow flows the Kaptai Khal, the canal that feeds water to Karnaphuli.

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.

## THINGS TO CARRY

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

## TRIP COST

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

