

All Aboard!

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Travelling by coach these days in the UK is a rather colourless experience. Large ergonomically-shaped vehicles with looping mirrors glide in and out of bus stations, the uniformed drivers gently bouncing on their hydraulically-powered seats. Comfortable and on time, they surge along the motorways, stay in lane, and by and large obey the rules. "But where's the excitement in that?", I hear you cry. If you want the thrill of a real bus journey, one which connects you with primal feelings of joy, terror and blessed relief, then Bangladesh is where it's at.

So all aboard the Manikganj Express, which I took recently with a small group of friends in order to visit some of the flood-affected areas. Greatly comforted by the various invocations to the Almighty painted on the bus's rather battered exterior, which looks like it has been attacked by a hammer-wielding army of metalworkers from the northern wastes, I am free to concentrate on the interior décor of this fine vehicle. The surprisingly soft velour seats come in a rather tasteful blood-red, and each is topped with a headrest covered by a cloth which may well once have been white. Let's just agree they haven't seen much washing in a while: this bus is clearly not sponsored by Wheel Soap Powder. Not by Rolex either: the clock above the driver stands still at 10 to 4. At least it's going to be accurate twice a day, but alas not on this journey.

And as for AC, I'm afraid this little vehicle is very much a poor cousin to the sleek beasts which swallow up the roads to Rajshahi and Chittagong. The Green Line fleet already seems like a luxury mode of transport from another planet, and we've only been going for two minutes. "AC" on this particular chariot means open windows, but in fact the air is fresh and breezy and we're all happy.

Besides, as we all know, open windows can have several useful purposes on a Bangladeshi cross-country bus. It seems often that people either eat too much before setting off or simply don't travel well, as many a passenger can be seen leaning out of the windows, leaving their breakfasts behind, perhaps in a desire to travel light. It could be worse however. Once my wife and I were travelling on a local bus across China when the elderly woman in the seat in front of us experienced similar gastronomic problems. Instead of sticking her face out of the window, she managed to vomit all over my wife's head. (Hope you're not eating your own Friday breakfast as you read this). Anyway, Chinese food being rice-based it wasn't that bad: it was as if my wife was suddenly covered in little polystyrene foam pieces, the sort you pack up computers with. We smiled indulgently at the woman, but were less forgiving when we saw her tucking into more rice at the first bus stop.

Anyway, back to the present. The bus is still half empty