

Star HOLIDAY

DHAKA SUNDAY OCTOBER 7, 2007

PACKAGE TOURS

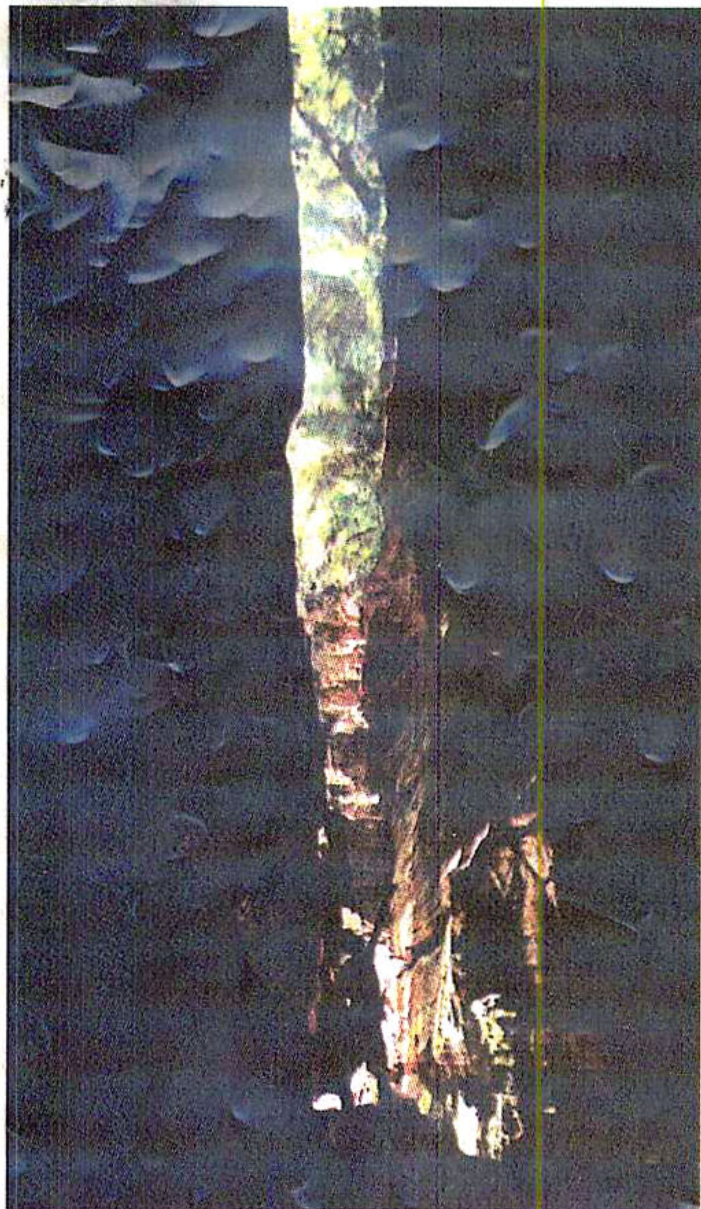


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BANGLADESH



PART 2 Journey to a bat cave

NEXT morning we resumed our journey at the first light of dawn. Towering peaks and emerald green forest patches lined the riverbanks. As the river was very shallow and the rapids very swift, we had to walk most of the way while Aung-shoy and Kong-la dragged and pushed the boat up the stream. This was quiet a pleasant walk through the sandy riverbanks filled with flowering shrubs and bushes. When we came across a group of young Mru tribesmen resting on the riverbanks, we paused our journey to talk to this group. To our utter surprise we

cultivated.

I wondered how many more surprises this forest may hold. Depression set in as I recollected the alarming rate of our hill forest destruction and realized that we will never know what potential food or medicinal plants and fruits we may lose forever.

We reached Remakri at sunset and climbed up to a nearby Marma village for the night. Mr. Poosaw, the headman of this village, was an old friend of ours and he greeted us with an open arm. From my previous trip I recalled how he had a special liking for our cans of sardines. So when I presented him with a few

and a half of grueling climb and then a terrifying descent into a Khumi village. Our plan was to lug all our gear up to the Khumi village and stay there for the next duration of our trip. As before, Aung-shoy weaved his magic over the Khumi headman and we were granted to stay at his house.

The bat cave is only a short distance away from this village. As soon as we finished our lunch, we headed to scout the cave. We were guided through a narrow tunnel like stream that flowed through a dense cover of foliage leading up to the bat cave, and reached the cave entrance after about half an hour of brisk walk.

would attempt to rappel into the cave through an opening on top.

As I entered this obnoxious hole my attitude mellowed a bit. The rocky entrance was beautifully carved by years of flowing water and huge round shaped boulders lined my way. Deep pools of water divided sections of the interior and I must find my way through this at some points, while in other points with the help of a bamboo raft made by our men. After I proceeded about fifty feet, the spacious hall like ambience turned into a narrow passageway. I left my tripod and camera and squeezed myself

to the top of the hill, I found Enam and Rifat still struggling to secure a safe descent to the cave. Finally, Enam rappelled into the cave and we heard his jubilant exultations.

Today was the last day of our exploration and our plan was to head back to our boat around mid morning. As I crawled out of my sleeping bag, I heard excitement in Mong's voice. He was urging me to come out quickly and look at my fishhooks. One of the local boys had gone out early in the morning to fetch the fishhook that we cast yesterday and there was good



discovered that none of them could speak Bangla, so our friend Mong Khuya came to our rescue as an interpreter. In my numerous encounters with the Mru tribesmen, I have found them to be extremely friendly and hospitable and this group was no exception. They offered us Pan and a strange fruit that I had never seen before. Even our guide Mong Khuya was unfamiliar with this fruit. A brilliant glossy dark red fruit about the size of an oversized olive. As I broke it open, viscous dark red fluid filled my hand. They encouraged me to put it in my mouth, but I was slightly hesitant, so one of them broke open a fruit and ate it.

As I put the fruit in my mouth I was surprised by the flavor. The pulp was somewhat stringy but sweet. But the one thing that struck me about this fruit was its viscous red juice, no wonder the locals call it "Gon-gol-see" meaning bleeding head. This fruit could be used as an excellent food coloring agent or for making fantastic ice creams. As I enquired I discovered that it's a wild seasonal fruit found in the local jungle only and not

cans of sardines, his face lit up with an east-west grin exposing his charcoal black teeth from years of smoking piped tobacco. Over dinner we discussed our plan to mount an expedition into the nearby bat cave and requested his assistance, which he enthusiastically agreed to.

From this Marma village, the bat cave is located about an hour

The stench of bat guano was overwhelming and we decided not to enter the cave today as we were not adequately prepared for the ordeal. But the following morning our spirits were high and our strength back. So with renewed vigor we headed for the bat cave. The plan was for me to enter the cave from the bottom while Enam Talukder and Rifat

into a tight crawl space. I could see the passageway going deeper away, but my enthusiasm to venture further eroded as my eyes started to sting from the overwhelming gaseous stench of bat droppings. After about an hour and a half, I decided to come out but not before setting some fishhooks with baits into the deep pool. After a brief climb

news. This fish was one of the reasons for this expedition here. On my previous trip I had only heard stories about the fish but this time it's for real.

According to the locals, the fish that we had managed to catch was still a juvenile weighing only about a kilogram and a half, but an adult fish can grow up to nearly 40kg.

This perhaps is a variety of lungfish that inhabits rocky crevasses of our hill rivers and streams. This was my first opportunity to look at this fish and I was very excited by what I saw.

As the sun climbed up, it was time for us to say goodbye and head for home, but at the core of my heart I did not look forward to going back to my city life in Dhaka. But return I must. I envy the simplicity of life among these hills, and hope to return back whenever I can. The chance to meet such wonderful people throughout our hills is such a pleasure. What these hills have given me is of great value to me and I shall cherish them forever as I concluded this trip.

Story: RONALD HALDER
Photo: ENAM TALUKDER

