renewed flow of tourists into India. Was I not risking my country looking architecturally anorexic in comparison to our neighbour's?

Still unsure, I decided to do something new: to open windows on things that aren't necessarily aesthetically pretty, but that could perhaps offer insights into the country's cultural, social, and economic mind-sets. I suspected that the team's exclusively Western members would appreciate a nuanced picture of the country by seeing a range of sites spanning from the Parliament Building to a brick-field on the periphery of the capital city. We reckoned that experiencing the dingy yet vibrant life of old Dhaka would be as valuable as visiting the Dhaka University's modernist oasis, TSC, designed by the Greek planner Constantin Doxiadis.

Tourism has become the largest industry in the world. Nearly a billion people travelled in 2007 alone, generating 35 per cent of the world's export of services and over 70 per cent for Least Developed Countries. Tourism produced an annual revenue of $733 billion, or two billion a day, in 2006. By 2020, 1.6 billion people are expected to trot the globe.

These are staggering numbers. Are we prepared to tap into this burgeoning industry? We are not. We have to think global. Just gauge Cox's Bazar's tourism barometer against those of Agra, Goa, or Phuket -- it's hardly flattering.

It would be naïve to view a few swanky hotels in Dhaka and a couple of thousand domestic tourists in Cox's Bazar as a tourism success story. I felt convinced that to be competitive in the international tourism market, we must come up with creative ideas to attract the world's peripatetic consumers of the travel industry.

The scope of conventional natural site-based tourism in Bangladesh is limited. Cox's Bazar, Kuakata, and Rangamati are attractive scenic places to visit, perhaps for someone from Dhaka, Dinajpur, or even Kolkata. But let us be rational: why would Paolo from Rome come to Cox's Bazar, or Susan from Florida, or Hitoshi from Tokyo? The longest-beach-in-the-world tag is just not enough to bring global tourists to Cox's Bazar. Without quality hotels, roads, water sports, night entertainment, varied culinary choices, gender sensitivity, and safety, the longest beach hardly appeals.

Besides, where are the advertisements? It would take a microscope to find Cox's Bazar in the world roster of coveted travel spots. Does a tourist family in Spain know anything about Bangladesh beyond her dubious distinction of being the country of natural calamities and chronic poverty? Image matters and, unfortunately, that is the entrenched image of Bangladesh around the world.

But in the age of media, image could always be crafted to suit a particular goal (attracting tourists, for example), provided there is a concerted effort by the people who know how to do it. Alas, there is often no sign of such effort in Bangladesh or her embassies around the world.

Who are our competitors in the tourism industry? Take India for instance. How are we going to compete with the Taj Mahal or the Red Fort? These are monuments enshrined in the world's collective imagination. Tourists from Argentina to New Zealand to Norway come en masse to see these monuments. Consider Nepal -- tourists flock to this tiny kingdom to witness what is virtually synonymous with human aspirations: the Himalayas. Yet, despite the presence of these daunting sites in our subcontinent, we should keep developing Cox's Bazar or Kuakata as world-class tourist venues.

However, that will not be enough in the 21st century. Let us return to the idea of creative thinking. After seeing the Parliament Building -- a major worldwide attraction for architecturally-minded tourists -- we went to Manikganj to see how micro-credit works and hear the gallant stories of rural women entrepreneurs. We participated in a Grameen town hall meeting in which a woman named Rabeya told us how she had invested her meagre first loan to accumulate enough capital to eventually buy a pickup truck.

Are we prepared to tap into this burgeoning industry? We are not. We have to think global. Just gauge Cox's Bazar's tourism barometer against those of Agra, Goa, or Phuket -- it's hardly flattering.

In a nutshell, Rabeya is now the rural equivalent of a corporate CEO. Her one-truck transportation company carries agricultural produce from the village to town. Rabeya's narrative resonated with the rags-to-riches story, the backbone of the American Dream! Being first-time visitors to Asia, the members of my team were stunned. They appeared to have discovered a new Bangladesh, one that is resilient and relentlessly entrepreneurial even in the face of abject poverty. The Grameen experience promised nothing less than a marketable tourism opportunity.

I have noticed lately, as I travelled