

# Star WOLIDAY

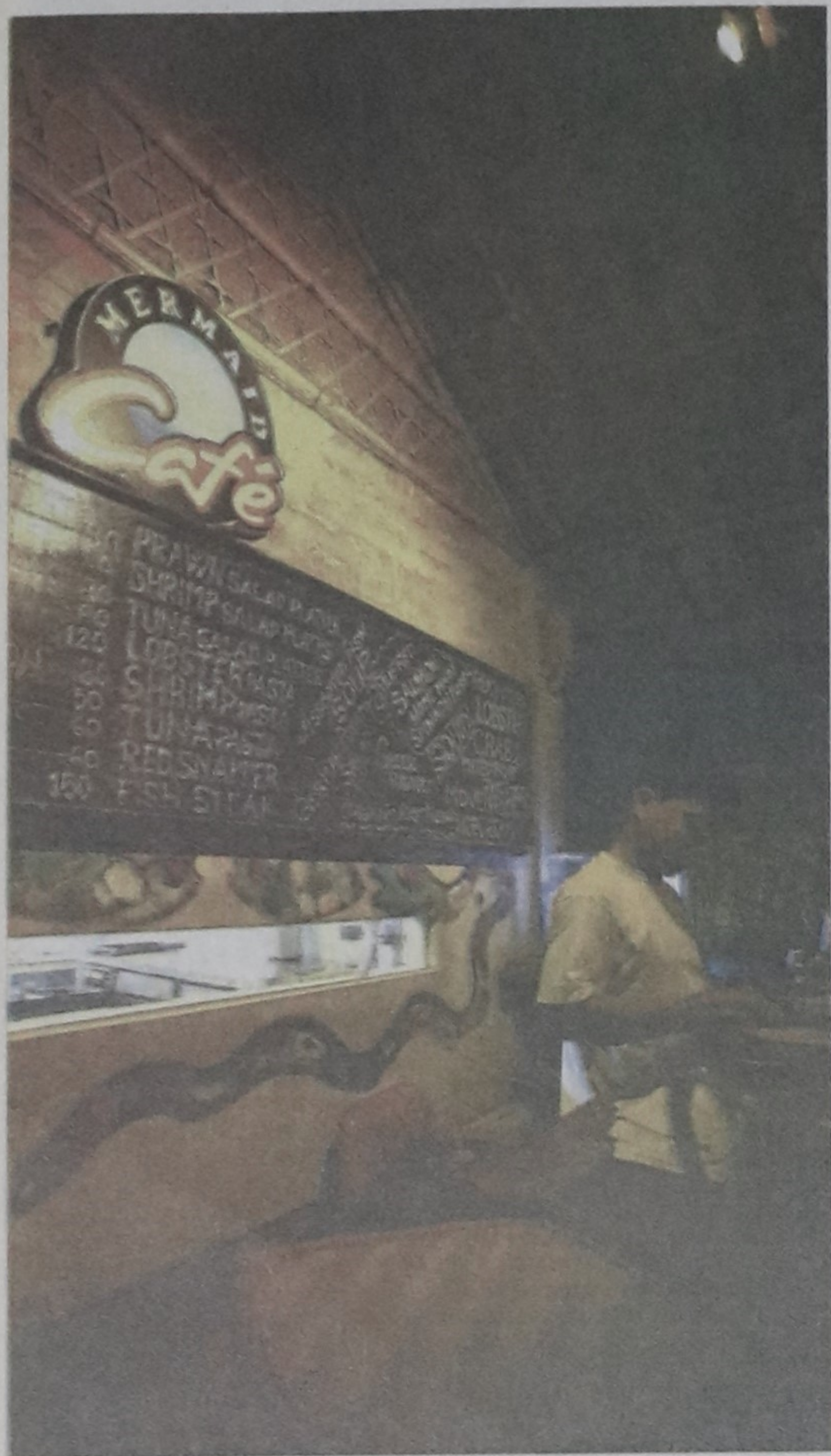
DHAKA TUESDAY MAY 20, 2008

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## COASTAL TREAT

# Discovering a new Cox's Bazar

**W**E wanted to travel along the coast. We called it a coast feast and so the traditional Cox's Bazar became our first spot.

On a sunny warm morning, we arrived in Cox's Bazar. It was a long time since I last visited this place -- my reason to avoid it was the huge crowd that I always loathed. You have no privacy. Secondly, with the

the middle-class is going out more and more, they are becoming holidaymakers. But still no signs of any clubs or entertainment spot. So, with the conservative Cox's Bazar, tourism stops there.

After we had checked into the forest guesthouse right on the beach (by the way, this is

the only staying place closest to the sea), we took a stroll on the beach. We walked a long distance to a quieter place, a huge fishing boat had been beached for repair. It lay banked on one side. We took a dip in the sea to ward off the heat and then sat in the shade of the boat until we felt another need for a swim.

We got off the water thirsty. We thought of the long walk to the forest bungalow and felt thirstier. Then someone saw this signboard -- Mermaid -- hidden behind sandbars. We walked to it and suddenly discovered a new world, like an oasis in the desert. A beautiful restaurant, landscaped with tree trunks, sawed-off wood boards showing all the rough edges, plants and bushes. The reed-thatched ceiling supported by bamboo poles hung low. The benches are made of pure raw timber chunks. Behind a bar-like counter was a black board scribbled with chalks the menu -- all very stylish.

We sat there, sipped on pineapple slush and lazily watched the sea. A Dutch couple was having lunch -- lobster soup and sandwiches. A Bangali mother in her late 30s walked in with four kids trailing her. The sun-baked kids were hollering around, playing funny games of words totally incomprehensible to us the oldies.

We felt lazy to get up, the lonely sea was giving us such a nice ambience to laze around. And the cool shade of Mermaid was so hypnotising. But our stomachs were grumbling. And we wanted to get that old taste of Jhaubon, the famous restaurant in Cox's Bazar.

And we suffered for our decision dearly. There was a big crowd outside Jhaubon; one might have mistaken the restaurant as a manpower recruitment centre if one did

not know what it is. We waited for half an hour while our tummies churned. Finally, we could place our orders and true to its old reputation, the dishes were fantastic.

We spent that afternoon by the sea lying on beach chairs. This time we wanted to see the people -- they came in every shades and hues. Four women clad from head to toe in burkhas walked by, their bare feet ankle-deep in water. The souls inside the burkhas were quiet young as their doe eyes showed, they giggled as they passed by us. The honeymooners were snuggling up against each other on the beach chairs, drowned in their own world. But there were another kind of romantics -- middle-aged men in suits and ties and obese women in bright red sarees and decked with gold ornaments strolled hand in hand. The husbands carrying the vanity bags. Two men in crew cut walked with hands wrapped around each other's waist. It was truly an exhibition of human beings.

The sun turned into a pink ball and dipped beyond the horizon in to the sea. When the sky was full of stars, someone said there was a new restaurant on the beach called Chill and Grill, and that there's going to be a full-moon party on the beach tonight. Our hearts danced, this was a new Cox's Bazar we were hearing about. Wow!

The moon was yet to rise and we walked through the sand in complete darkness -- it was that magical time before it becomes a full-moon night. From the distance we could hear drum beats. Kerosene lanterns indicated the way to the restaurant. Once inside the restaurant, we were amazed -- we could not believe our eyes that this was Bangladesh, this was our old quaint Cox's Bazar. If I were

brought here blindfolded, I would have vouched that this was Goa. We sat on wooden sofas, put our legs on raw-textured wooden tables, relaxed to the swish of the palm trees and watched the neon-lit window of the kitchen. The aroma from food was simply mouth-watering. There was a hammock tied between two palm trees and somebody was lying in it. A small pool was lit mysteriously.

The full-moon beach party started after 10. Huge sound boxes set on the sand blared music. People were appearing on the moon-lit beach -- men and women. And they swung their bodies to the rhythm of the beat. The soft sand underneath was a bit awkward, but you felt good. This was a new breed of tourists we were meeting here -- the ones who are bold and fun-seeking, who love to spend holidays as holidays should be.

We walked away from the party at midnight, leaving the drumbeat behind. Ahead of us was the foaming sea and the sandy beach all washed with moonlight. There was that big fishing boat we saw in the morning, still lying on its side. We could see the pale shadow it cast. The beach chairs were piled together. We lay on them, the huge moon was hanging directly over our head, bathing this whole world in its soft rays. Away in the distance, we could make out a fishing trawler, slowly bobbing on the sea. A lonely dog trotted along the beach aimlessly. It looked like a spirit coming from nowhere and going nowhere. We felt light like a sheaf of corn ready to be blown away to the moon.

Story: INAM AHMED  
Photo: MUNTASIR MAMUN



SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

fall of dusk Cox's Bazar turns into the most boring sea resort I have ever visited. There are no clubs, no entertainment facilities. You just shut yourself up behind the hotel doors and brood over your gloomy years.

So I came here with much trepidation. But what struck me as our car coasted through the busy town is the amount of money that has gone into tourism here -- newer and newer hotels have shot up into the sky and funnily none of them are empty even on this supposedly off-season. Rickshaw fare is astronomically high to piss off any traveller. And tourists were visible even more now --

