

Star HOLIDAY

DHAKA TUESDAY FEBRUARY 10, 2009

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Taj Casaria, 2nd Floor, 25 Gulshan Avenue, Dhaka 1212
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THAILAND



CONTIC EXPERIENCE PART-2

The enchanting chars

WE were now in the middle of the Jamuna and heading towards the Padma. A wind got up and the chill factor multiplied. Our jackets and the thin shawls provided by the *khalasis* were proving inadequate. We climbed down to the deck. It is 23 feet wide and quite long. So spacious that you can have a good party there. We noticed something funny about the deck -- the front part which is exposed to the sky is warmer than the rear part covered by the canopy. We thought the engine must have its

exhaust in the front. There was a manhole port and we opened it to go inside. Some empty wine bottles and water bottles lay there. The warmth remained a mystery.

A strange feeling engulfed us as we sailed through the drifting mist. We could see the silhouettes of fishing boats moored in the bleary world. They looked like some mysterious animals in deep slumber. We could hear the fishermen's voices muffled by the fog. The water looked like a huge molten metal sheet. It was a surrealistic world

arrested in the stillness of the nature.

Then we saw the first seagulls -- lonely ones flapping their way across the river with cold hearts. The cold must have sent the fish sleeping in the bottom of the river and breakfast was hard for them to find. We regarded their flying path -- where they are going and why they are going is so mysterious. Would they find more fish in the other part of the river? Or they were going to their chicks with food?

Suddenly we saw the dolphin -- it must be an infant no more than four feet long. For a fleeting moment it broke over the water and went down. We clearly saw its spouting face. A little later it appeared again and again and again. And then another dolphin appeared. Ten minutes later we found the mother dolphin about seven feet long. Its grey body glistened in the diffused sunlight. Two more dolphins appeared very close to our boat. And a little later another one. We were spellbound by this display of the cetaceans.

When the rivers are getting polluted, dolphins still survive in the Jamuna. And that is a surprising fact. Very close to the dolphins we saw the fishermen's boats spreading the fine nets called *current net* -- a big enemy of the wonderful mammals.

By 12, a big char came into view. The mist had cleared by now and the water looked translucently

green, almost like a lagoon and the gray char like a huge stone island. We slowed the engine and anchored.

The char must have been accumulated over a few years and it was still expanding. The stretch near the river was pure white sand, as white as chalk powder. We walked on the loose sand and our steps made a soft rasping sound. It was pure fun to walk so wobbly. We looked behind and saw that long snaking line of footsteps disappearing into the green river. The boat was already invisible behind the high shore. Only the top of its sail pole was visible.

We found signs of soil formation in the middle of the char. Planktons and bird droppings were congealing the loose sand into a solid state. The colour here was deep brown. Bird foot prints -- large and small -- were everywhere.

In the distant was a large raised land like a knoll with wild grasses growing in clumps. We headed for it and found the land close to it was broken for peanut cultivation. The plants were just coming out in green leaves. We were on the knoll now. It was huge and grass blades grew like porcupine quills as if the spiky animal is buried under the sand.

And then we noticed the twitters of a thousand birds. It was an amazing experience. We were standing in the middle of the grassland and birdsongs were reverberating from all

corners. The feeling was like that of sitting in a giant theatre hall filled with surround sound of birdcalls. We saw barn swallows and marsh swallows. Thousands of them with their curved wings and forked tails. We looked under the bush and saw their nests. Thin speckles of eggs were still there. Then there was this other species of bird about the size of a house sparrow but with a long tail -- we did not know its name. A single large quack drew our attention -- a lone lapwing walking by the edge of the char and looking at us with its big round eyes.

In the grass we found colourful caterpillars that would turn into butterflies in their adulthood and grasshoppers the colour of sand. As we they were so beautifully camouflaged that it was hard to notice them until you really looked for something in the sand. As we touched them they flew away whirring. And then there was this beautiful golden frog sitting in a dump, too lazy to crawl away from our gazes. We looked around for more, at least for its pair. But there was none to find.

By the time we finished our search, it was already 2 o'clock and we were hungry. On the boat awaited the most delicious lunch -- khichuri, beef ball, coral steak, chicken, salad and a special dish of brinjal mixed with egg.

By the time we finished our lunch, the engine roared again -- it was time to

return. There were a lot of activities on the rooftop -- the *khalasis* were struggling with a huge orange sail. It was a difficult task because the pole itself was 100 feet tall. Finally, the task was done and the sail caught wind and puffed up to a wonderful sight. It was claimed to be the biggest sail in Bangladesh and you would not disbelieve it once you see it yourself.

Slowly the boat cruised across the glistening waters of the Jamuna. We felt relaxed and lay on the deck to enjoy the afternoon sun. Close to dusk, we passed a small char and saw a flock of ruddy shelduck. These ducks locally known as Chakha have become so rare these days because of poaching that we were thrilled by the sight.

As our boat inched closer to the char the ducks were airborne and winged their way west to the setting sun in a straight line. We felt a strange emptiness as we sat there in the chilly wind watching them fly away.

Story: INAM AHMED
Photo: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN, TAWFIK ELAHI

Contic
House 23, Road 121,
Gulshan 1
Dhaka, Bangladesh
Email:
wasamadoja@gmail.com
Info@contic.com
Tel: (+88 02) 8814823,
8814824,
(+88 02) 9860047, 9860434,
9860436

