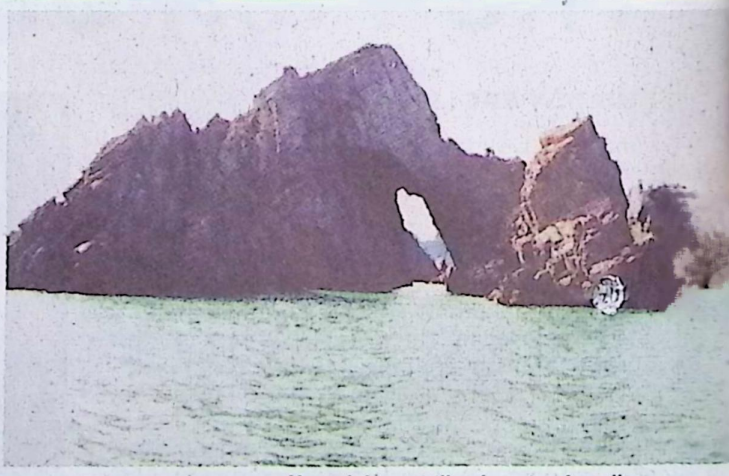


A natural archway on the sea, Hongdo, South Korea.



Hongdo's coastline is nature's gallery.

It's not difficult to reach Hongdo. There are scheduled ferry services to cover the 115 kilometres from Mokpo City on the mainland. It takes two and a half hours. Hongdo is small, about six kilometres long and two and a half kilometres wide. It has two villages, Il-gu and the I-gu, between them home to the 710 islanders; and if it's winter when the boat docks in Il-gu harbour, there'll likely be locals waiting on the pier to offer home-stay style accommodation; but in the summer the island is said to be crowded, mostly by Korean mainlanders. It's a popular destination.

It's not difficult to organise the two-hour circumnavigation tour of the island by boat, which is the best way to appreciate the gallery of rock formations, nature's art.

But before that it's possible to follow the Il-gu-to-I-gu road, the stone and dirt pathway up the nearer hill that rises to about 200 metres. There, the camellia bushes grow large and create, in places, a tunnel. The views, over the island, over the sea and down to the villages, are deep breaths of oxygen, life-bringing. The island takes its name, Red, from the effect of each sunset on its rocks and cliffs; although in spring there is the red bloom of the camellias to be considered.

It was on the second day, near to the end of the circumnavigation tour, that the smaller boat had suddenly appeared. Aboard I could see three men, in thick jackets, two in baseball caps. They had knives.

The passengers were animated. What's going on, I thought. It was only a matter of moments before the nature of the trouble became apparent.

It was about fish. Fresher fish there could not be. The fishermen in the smaller boat had just caught them and wished to sell them. Meanwhile the fish flapped about in a water-filled bucket.

Although I realise it's nearly criminal activity in Bangladesh, I confess that I don't often eat fish. A small piece on occasion I will enjoy, especially if it's fried. But in Hongdo the challenge was greater still.