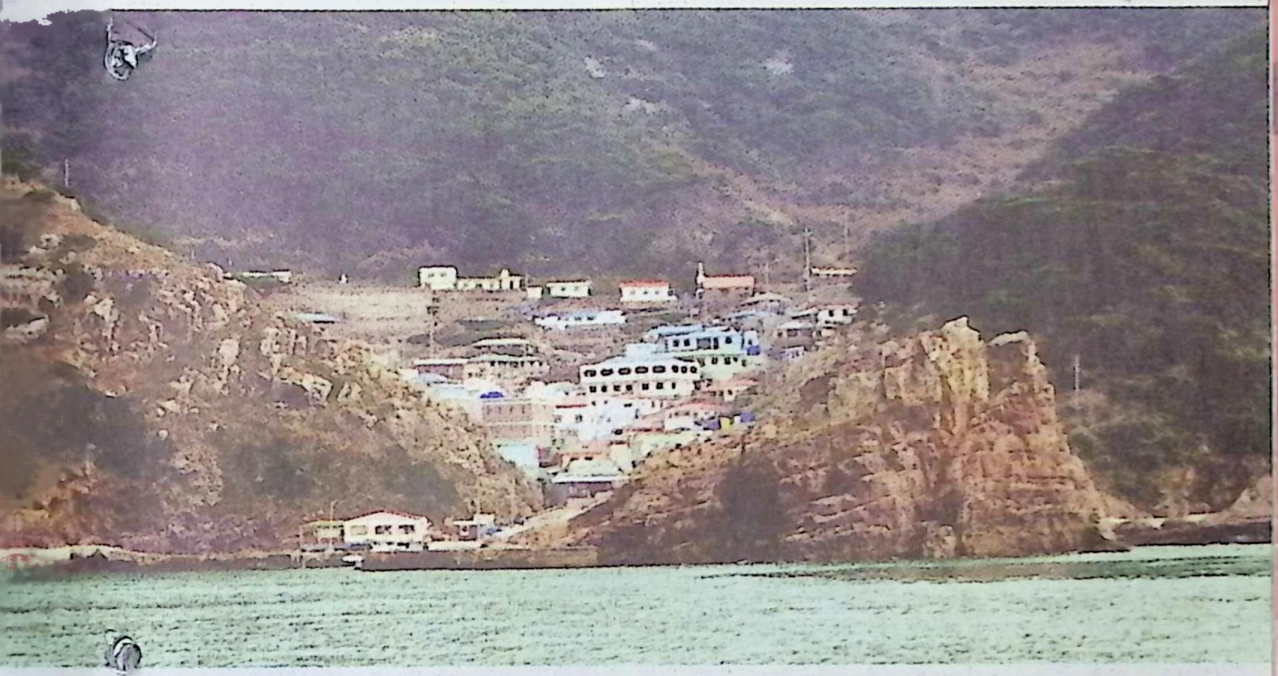
I watched as fish were sold, the unusual part being in how they were delivered: pre-chopped and salted. With each sale the fishermen took the fish to a wooden board on the deck of their boat, scaled and gutted them on the spot, cutting them into thin strips of boneless meat. Then they were sprinkled with salt, put into a bag and handed across to the larger boat.

The even more unusual part was how they were eaten: directly. There was, I thought, a missing step in the process, in accordance with usual procedure: the cooking part. I watched as Koreans took thin strips of raw fish by hand and pushed them into their mouths.

South Korea. It was rather the opposite: as if raw fish sought me out, following me around the country like a hunter stalking deer. At almost every meal, in nearly every restaurant, I had suffered for not being able to make sense of the written Korean on the menu. The only thing to do was to randomly point to a listed item and cross fingers. The first time, when the waiter returned some minutes later with a large plate of raw fish, I thought to try my best at it, thinking on the next occasion there might be something that had seen a bit more of a pot or a pan. It's a mystery how it came about, but inevitably, time after time, my random choice was a plate of raw fish.



The smaller village of I-gu, Hongdo.

I was fortunate, arguably, because on our boat was one Ms. Kim from Suwon, near to Seoul. She was on holidays with her family and her sister's family. Her sister was introduced as 'aunty', but in her fluffy leopard-skin patterned jacket she looked too young for the title. Ms. Kim spoke some English and although we'd not said much before that, the enthusiasm of the raw fish snack somehow induced greater conversation and an offer to share.

At the same time from somewhere that rice wine, the Korean version called soju, surfaced, to accompany the fish. So I joined in: a nip of soju, then a few strips of salted raw fish gulped down the throat just as a pelican might do. It wasn't bad, actually, although it might've been better not to know what it was. The mood on the boat became festive as everyone, and I was the only foreigner among them, drank and ate.

I don't wish to imply it was the first time I'd faced raw fish during that preceding first week in

This result was despite my deliberately having tried to increase the chances of variation, by pointing towards the top of one menu at lunch and towards the bottom of another during dinner. Somehow, I was remarkably consistent in my random choices. Yet I was sure Koreans ate other things.

But of all the raw fish that followed, chased and hunted me down, it was the fish of Hongdo that was the most special, and clearly the freshest.

These days in Dhaka it's usual to consider the freshness of food, especially when eating from a street side stall. Food freshness is an important consideration anywhere.

It's just that in countries with a national cuisine that's something like South Korea's, a further consideration for the uninitiated might be if the food isn't actually, on occasion, a little too fresh.

Or, probably, it's the sort of thing one learns to enjoy. ■