

On Cloud Nine – Part I

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I caught my breath as we drove along the road to the border. In the distance, the bluish hills tantalisingly hinted at a cool reprieve from the heat of the delta. But what had really caught my attention were the low hanging wisps of milky cloud against the backdrop of those brooding peaks. "That's why it's called Meghalaya, you know," our guide said knowledgeably, "It's the abode of the clouds." My parents and I were on our way to Shillong, where I had been invited as a panellist to attend the second CALM Fest. The festival derives its unusual name from the fact that it celebrates "creative arts, literature and music", and purports to differentiate itself from other literary festivals by its relaxed, intimate vibe.

I was keeping an open mind, but I hoped that the festival would live up to its billing. I'd had to maintain a punishing pace for the last six months, and a little relaxation was very much in order. Since I was participating in two panel sessions, I knew there had to be some work involved, but I generally make a conscious effort not to spend much time online when I'm travelling, so that in itself would make a welcome change!



Shillong 4 - city and clouds.

The previous night's stay at the beautiful Nazimgarh Wilderness resort at Lalakhel had been a good start to the trip. My research had clearly indicated that the quickest way to get to Shillong was to fly up to Sylhet, and cross the border into India at Tamabil/Dawki, thereafter driving up to the hill town. So despite the fact that there were an idiotic number of hartals to navigate while getting in and out of Bangladesh, the three of us decided to go for that option.

As it turned out, part of the hartal navigation (and I will not bore you with the details of how many times the plans had to be changed and re-changed, and how the return air ticket actually had to be cancelled and re-purchased) involved an unanticipated stay at Nazimgarh, where the lush greenery and amazing sense of serenity immediately puts you into holiday mode.

The owner told us a funny story about some expatriate families that had come for a short break there with their children. The flight out of Dhaka had left the children slightly confused about where they actually were, but they enjoyed their stay at the resort, making ample use of the swimming pool and the open spaces and greenery to frolic around. On the day they were leaving, one little girl turned to another, and said "The holiday is over. Now we are going back to Bangladesh"! Given how beautiful our country is, it's sad how few green spaces we have left to enjoy in the urban sprawl of Dhaka, and how little of nature survives - that too, against the odds - in the city. So much so that to the uninitiated (particularly six-year-old-foreigners), the emerald rice paddies, yellow mustard fields and open spaces of rural Bangladesh actually seem like another country...

The ride to the border had a few more Kodak moments in store: a tiny mongoose crossing the road and disappearing into the bushes like a streak of lightning; a mullah on a motorcycle, talking animatedly on his mobile; the Shiri river running alongside the dirt road - a deep shade of malachite green, with a few patches of brown where the rain the previous night had disturbed the muddy riverbed; a little girl wearing nothing but shorts, with a scarf carefully wrapped around her head for purposes of modesty; an enormous black pig, accompanied by one tiny piglet, confidently crossing the road; and a three-storey pink pagoda-like house that resembled a wedding cake, with white icing and surma designs scrawled over it. And, to prove conclusively that I was in a holiday frame of mind, I was amazed to spot what appeared to be a shorts-wearing tourist with a backpack. Upon closer inspection, he turned out to be a man with his lungi neatly tucked up to avoid the lurking pools of rainwater, who carried his umbrella conveniently hanging from the back of his collar!

The last couple of kilometres leading up to the