

# Tourism in Bangladesh, backpacking is the missing link

ANDREW EAGLE

The Isan region of north-eastern Thailand is famous for insects as part of its regional cuisine. According to locals, the tradition of eating deep-fried grasshoppers, crickets, bee larvae or ant eggs stems from when Isan was so poor that usual foodstuffs were out of reach. Relatively less developed, Isan attracts fewer international tourists than elsewhere in Thailand.

The Thai government has been investing in a homestay programme in Isan, which involves training villagers how to host visitors in their homes. Homestays are well sign-posted and villagers are offered a small grant to buy furniture.

Unlike many parts of Thailand, travellers to Isan have culture high on their priority list. As such, in bringing international visitor close to village life, the homestay programme is well-suited. It also ensures tourism benefits enter the economy at a grassroots level.

Backpacking in some form is similarly the key to unlocking the vast tourism potential of Bangladesh. An industry that could stand proudly, behind only garments and foreign remittances as contributor to national income, tourism's lack of development over past decades is likely due to neglect of the backpacker segment. It is often where backpackers tread first that other types of tourists follow.

Ask many a Bangladeshi and they will readily speak of poor roads and



Backpackers enjoy artistic simplicity, like this sink made from a clay bowl at Bunloed's Homestay in rural Thailand.

PHOTO: ANDREW EAGLE

transport, the lack of tourist facilities as reasons why more international tourists don't arrive. Backpackers however, don't mind a rough bus ride and they want 'authentic' not 'tourist' facilities.

Backpackers are more willing to try a new destination which, despite decades

of efforts, Bangladesh still is; and they are more risk tolerant. While Bangladesh is safe, nobody can deny that over past years there haven't been periods of travel security concern. The backpacker segment is the one likely to bounce back quickly when the political

climate again cools, as by tradition it does.

Besides, the backpacker trail is well-established in India and Nepal. To entice backpackers who are already in South Asia over the border must be the easiest way to bring in more tourists.

Another advantage is the levels of investment required to support a backpacker industry are obviously lower than for mid-level tourism. Had Bangladesh focused on backpacking 20 years ago, no doubt a significant tourism industry at all levels would already have emerged.

So what do backpackers want? It goes without saying they don't like bureaucracy. While visa-at-the-border arrangements are good, particularly if available for many nationalities and also at land borders, when entering a country like Thailand or Singapore without any need to pre-plan and free of cost, the Western tourist feels both valued and welcome. Besides, backpackers are on a budget.

Backpackers prefer independent travel. Package tours have their role, but both the Sundarbans and Bandarban are not yet ideal because of the lack of ability to move freely. In the case of the Sundarbans, it might be an idea to make a part of the forest more accessible, so a backpacker can just turn up to be greeted by local rangers or guides ready to move into the forest.

In Bandarban, while security dictates extra arrangements it is unlikely the region can become an international backpacker hotspot, which is a shame since by bringing money into the local economy, tourism itself has the potential to improve security. At the current time, why would any backpacker seek a minority cultural

CONTINUED ON PAGE 37



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