

## ... backpacking the missing link

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experience in Bandarban when it is much easier to do so in northern Thailand and, coming soon, in Myanmar?

Indeed across the Indian border from Bandarban is Mizoram and attempts to develop tourism there are also interesting. Mizoram differs from Bandarban in being well-developed. Mizoram is the second most literate state in India. The governments of Mizoram and India have visibly invested in infrastructure like roads and electricity in the security-sensitive state. Yet the primary attractions of Mizoram and Bandarban, the scenery and interesting local cultures, are similar.

In Mizoram, where permit requirements for foreigners have been dropped, there is a string of publicly-owned hotels in villages and towns. These hotels are like well-maintained government bungalows in Bangladesh. Being inexpensive, clean and sometimes cosy in design, they tick backpacker preferences. Being publicly funded has allowed hotel investment in less obvious sites like dramatic mountaintops. Moreover, any Indian digni-



Each cabin at Bunloed's Homestay at a village in Thailand's Isan features a veranda and hammock. Rates are reasonable at 200 - 300 Baht per double cabin.

PHOTO: ANDREW EAGLE

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tary wishing to stay at these hotels, which double as visiting bureaucrat accommodation, is not given preference over a tourist. State officials need to book like anybody else. While many of these hotels yet see few international

tourists, the infrastructure is well-designed to kick-start a backpacker industry in Mizoram state.

The experience of Isan meanwhile, tells that not all homestays are successful: one issue is language. Not many Isan villagers have English skills, but there are others, like Bunloed's Homestay in the village Ban Kham Pia, that are examples of creating tourism potential from little more than a village setting.

Unlike other homestays, Bunloed's is a yard with double-room cabins made of local materials, wood with thatched roofs. The homestay has five such cabins, each with a small veranda featuring a hammock, and in the centre, an atmospheric open-air shared kitchen. Guests

often buy their own produce and cook for themselves.

There are a few factors that help to make Bunloed's a success: its charismatic owner speaks English. While rooms are basic, they are charming, which appeals to Westerners seeking a village ambience and not so much to Thais who, like many middle-class Bangladeshi tourists, prefer more standardised accommodation. Bunloed's also has electricity to run a communal fridge, good bathrooms with Western commodes, and gas cooking facilities.

Backpackers don't only wish to see the big sites. They will quite happily spend a week in any Bangladeshi village. They would be satisfied with

clean, family-run accommodation.

Bangladesh would do well to develop a network of tourist-friendly villages across the country. Why not start with 20 villages as a pilot and publish a village homestay book featuring each 'tourist village' in the network with contact details and instructions on how to get there by public transport?

Such villages would not only have homestays, but also bicycle rentals, available village musicians perhaps, traditional industries such as embroidery or weaving, or fishing expeditions that the visitor might observe and participate in. There might be Western-suitable local eateries or, better still, village women trained in how to cook to suit the tastes of international guests.

Ideally there would be locals involved who speak English.

It would need to be a committed, well-marketed approach because such a village network would take time to become entrenched in the Western tourist mind. Unlike in Isan, no Bangladeshi village has millions of foreign tourists elsewhere in the country to attract.

In choosing suitable villages, local advantages could be identified, such as the nearly extinct use of fishing otters in Narail and Khulna. In Narail, a very small number of foreigners already venture to witness the curiosity, and at times they stay in quite squalid conditions with local

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