

## ... backpacking the missing link

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families. Moreover some families have learnt through desperation to view Westerners primarily in terms of potential cash; leading to thoughtless overcharging and less than genuine hospitality. But with a little tourism training they might better understand how to build a longer-term, more sustainable local industry. In addition, inviting international tourists to see the otters can save the dying but ancient otter fishing custom.

Also of note are the minority Mandi and Khasi villages in the hills of Moulvibazar and along the very picturesque Meghalayan border. In these areas visitors can encounter fascinating matrilineal cultures without the added bureaucracy of Bandarban.

Some islands in the Bay of Bengal have great potential due to their stunning beauty, wildlife like deer, and the ever-popular launch journey to get there. Monpura is a good example, with the added advantage of exceptionally friendly locals. But with only the government bungalow, it currently has nowhere very suitable for visitors to stay.

Villages in striking distance of national parks like Lawachara might also be suitable places where international visitors can experience ordinary Bangladeshi rural life. A day trip or two to the national park can easily be spaced between several other days reading a book in a hammock or wandering around a village in leisurely exploration. Similarly, villages inside tea gardens, perhaps in parts of Tangail and Manikganj where there are impressive palaces to visit, among Rajshahi's mango groves or near haors, have potential. What backpackers don't want are 'resorts' that are removed from the local community.

Were authorities to work with villages willing to commit to hosting international backpackers, cultural friction can be minimised through increased awareness, and backpackers can leave Bangladesh with memories of a homestay experience that, if traditional Bangladeshi hospitality is fostered as a focal point of the income generating exercise, might well be the highlight of their Bangladeshi stay. It will certainly have them recommending Bangladesh to friends.

More importantly, regardless of the overall economic benefit at a national level, backpacking offers an indispensable foot-in-the-door to Bangladesh as a tourist destination. It's a focus that's been missing in the development of a national tourism industry.

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The view from the government travel lodge on top of Mizoram's Mount Hmuifang. A few local buildings and a valley of clouds... Government investment has allowed Mizoram to develop cheap, well-run hotels in prime locations.

PHOTO: ANDREW EAGLE

# The beauty within

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Outside of Bangladesh, very little is known about the wonders it holds. The most popular place in Bangladesh amongst outsiders is Dhaka, and not for good reason. On my recent trip to China, an American journalist showed interest in Bangladesh, asking me about different sites inside Dhaka, the behaviour of Dhakaites, the delicacies, the roads. I remember replying, "Don't judge Bangladesh based on Dhaka alone, you wouldn't judge China based on only Beijing. The real Bangladesh lies outside the concrete jungle, where the green grass, the red sun and the humility of the people make up the country we love."

This year is perfect for Bangladesh to attract attention towards the abundant natural beauty it has been blessed with. Everyone talks of Sylhet, Chittagong and Bandarban, but they do not truly know what magic lies within. Waterfalls, natural, bountiful greenery, humble locals, hidden mysteries that lurk within the surroundings, waiting to be uncovered—beautiful Bangladesh has it all.

Sylhet, known mostly for its endless tea gardens, has many a place to replenish an adventurer's heart. Located in the North-East of Bangladesh along the banks of the river Surma, Sylhet can boast of some of the most noteworthy sites in the country. The water in Ratargul Swamp Forest

comes from the contiguous Goain River. During the rainy season, this evergreen forest is submerged in 20 to 30 feet of water in some parts. Other parts of the forest get so narrow that you can't go even pass by boat. The beauty of this forest truly comes to life during monsoon. Most of the trees that grow here are Pongamia pinnata (koroch). The more time you spend, the more will you be amazed. The trees, the water, the boat rides, everything creates an amazing environment, and a tour is bound to give you a surreal feeling.

Sylhet's Lawachara National Park is a semi-evergreen forest covering approximately 12.5 sq. km of area. The Lawachara Rain Forest is home to an

assortment of plants, birds and animals, and is considered to be of great ecological importance. One of the attractions is the white-faced gibbons. Birds such as bee-eaters, strikingly colourful parrots and owls can also be spotted in the tree-tops. Botanists should note to note that the incredibly rare chloroform tree can be found here—the only one in Asia.

Sylhet's Khadimnagar National Park, previously known as Khadimnagar Reserve Forest, is home to some of the most remarkable biodiversity. One of the most important nature reserves of the country, it is a mixed semi-evergreen and evergreen forest, comprised of floral resources, Non-Timber Forest Product (NTFP) resources, tim-

ber resources, bamboo, cane, etc. It is one of the must-see destinations in Sylhet.

Our port city, Chittagong, has always been a favourite, even amongst the locals. The graves of the soldiers who fought in the Second World War can be found in Chittagong's war cemetery. In this quiet, picturesque cemetery within the city, over 700 soldiers from England, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, India, Myanmar, East and West Africa, Netherlands and Japan who met their end on the Myanmar front, lie buried in eternal peace.

Foy's Lake, the man-made lake in Chittagong created in

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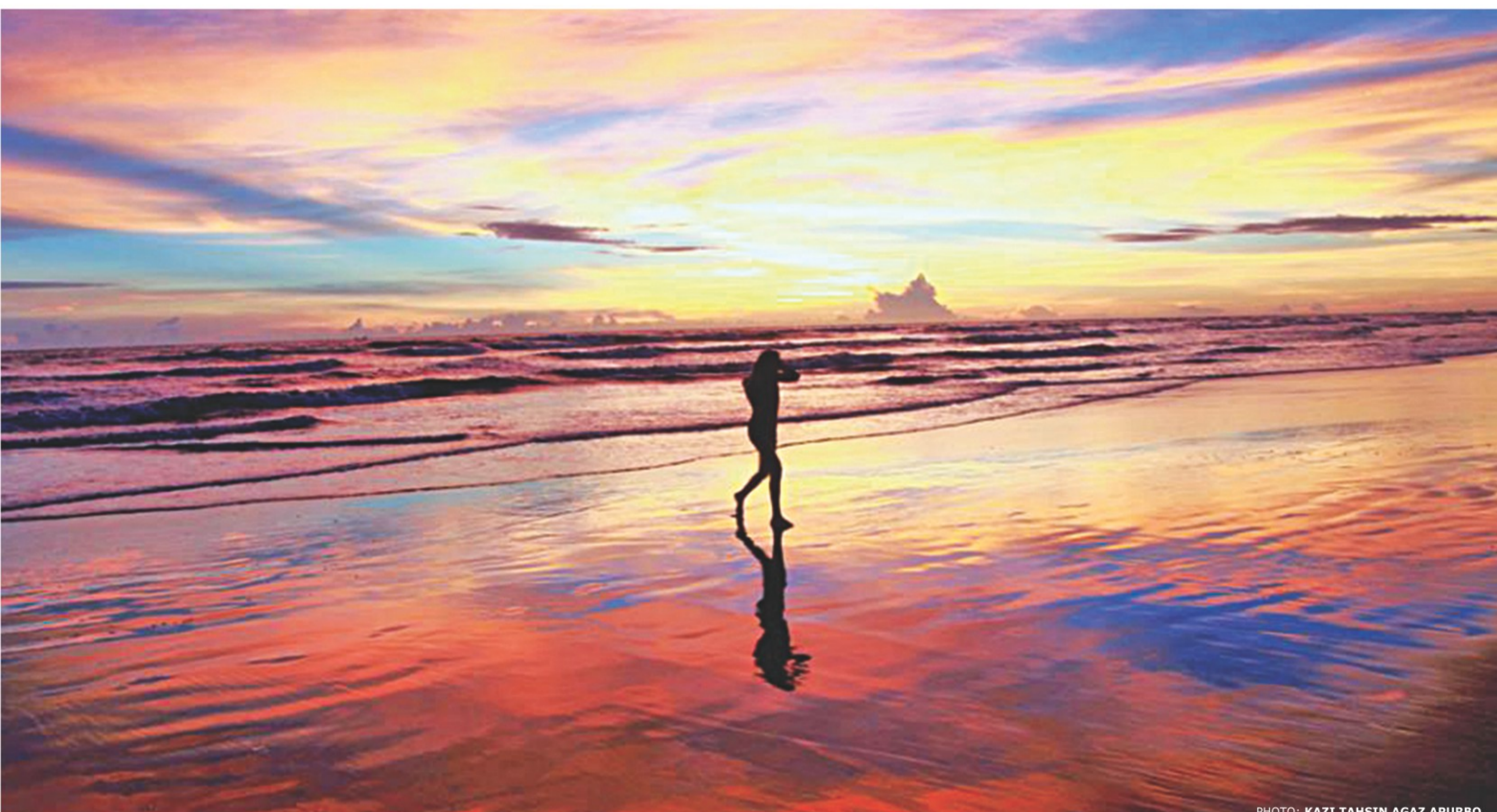


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