



A HIKER'S GUIDE TO KEOKRADONG

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I always pictured mountaintops, even the ones in Bangladesh, as unimaginably high and only reachable by mountaineers. I was proven wrong when I, a guy who takes rickshaws for the shortest of distances and sits in front of his computer all day, hiked almost 3200 feet up to the peak of Keokradong, one of the highest peaks in Bangladesh.

ROAD TO KEOKRADONG

When I say road, I don't mean wide concrete roads, I mean narrow passages of clay and rocks with the hill on one side and a steep edge of doom on the other. But fortunately you'll have the scenic beauty and the shortness of breath to distract you from certain peril.

The main hike starts from Boga Lake, which can be reached from Bandarban town via two *chaander gari* rides with a stop at Ruma Bazar. *Chaander gari* rides are the best and to enjoy its feel, you can start the journey just before evening falls. The road from the town to Ruma is quite safe and will take about two and a half hours. Ruma has all the accommodations for a night's stay. You'll have to go through a checkpoint here and you can (and should) hire a guide. Charge your electronic gears here because there won't be much scope later on.

The next stop is Komola Bazar, where you'll let go of your ride and buy a stick that'll be your most trusted partner for the whole hike. Here we found a road for cars to Boga Lake which was under construction and so led us to climb up a hill track. If you too have to climb and it's

your first hike, don't rush it. Take intervals every two or three minutes depending on your crew's stamina. After a climb up this steep track, the scene of the vast lake that is Boga will definitely come as a relief.

Take rest and have food at the village beside Boga Lake. Buy fruits and water for the hike. You can spend the night if it's too late to proceed; there's an army camp to check in. Next is the main hike – to Keokradong – which takes about three hours.

The hike for a first timer is fun if not anything else, unless you get easily fatigued. You may get a cramp. You might feel as if your whole life is flashing before you. But nevertheless you should keep going, with regular intervals, with your crew's encouragement and your guide's smooth lie about how close you are. There's a stream called Chingri Jhorna, where you can freshen up. After about three fourth of the way there's a small village, Darjeeling Para. You can see Keokradong's peak from there. You can have a cup of tea at the local stall and explore a bit; the view from there is worth a few long glances. But don't linger too long because the real deal is still half an hour's hike to go.

For adventure's sake I won't describe the peak for you, but what I will say is that you will not be disappointed. But at

the same time you may get bored because there's not much to do. The usual plan here is to enjoy being "the king of the world" as long as possible, take lots of selfies and climb back down to Boga Lake. Try not to miss out on the chance of an overnight stay at the peak, especially if there's at least half a moon overhead. I was lucky to get that experience, and I will never be grateful enough for the actual plan getting ruined. You don't need to worry about accommodations or safety. There's a mini hotel there and an army camp.



Laying down on the grassy peak at the dead of night (which is around 9 pm there), looking at the starry sky with no earthly object at the corners of your sight can bring out anyone's inner "feelosopher".

Wake up early the next day, watch the sunrise and climb down with dawn's wind at your back. The hike down is so much easier but at the same time riskier. You'll reach Boga Lake in no time. After breakfast it's the same route back to Bandarban town.

APPARELS AND GEARS

The key is to take essentials only. When packing, keep in mind that you have to walk for 3 hours uphill with little resting time. A heavy bag will tire and slow you down.

- A backpack

- Two t-shirts and a shirt for the cold nights
 - One or two pairs of trousers
 - One *gamcha*
 - Hiking boots and an extra pair of socks
 - Necessary electronics: a phone, a camera (and related accessories), a power bank, a charger
 - Oral saline (good when dehydrated, bad when thirsty)
 - Mosquito repellents
 - Muscle relaxers
- First aid kit and medicines for pain, fever, food poisoning, acidity and vomiting

EXPENSES

Transportation:

- Dhaka—Bandarban: BDT 700-800 for the popular non A/C buses
- Bandarban—Ruma Bazar or Ruma Bazar—Boga Lake: BDT 2000-4500; a *chaander gari* can accommodate approximately 12-14 people

Accommodation at local cottages in Boga Lake and Keokradong: BDT 100

Food: This depends on the hiker. You can get a filling meal at both Boga Lake and Keokradong in under BDT 150. Additional snacks include water and fruits for the hike.

With a group of ten to twelve people the total cost ranges from BDT 4000 to 4500. Take 5000 just to be safe.

Fatiul Huq Sujoy is a tired soul (mostly because of his frail body) who's patiently waiting for Hagrid to appear and tell him, "Ye're a saiyan, lord commander." Suggest him places to travel and food-ventures to take at fb.com/SyedSujoy

