

SPOTLIGHT

SAILING ON ANTIQUES

When the Rocket Steamers service was introduced almost a century ago, it was used mostly by the elite classes and considered the fastest mode of water transport; thus, many believe that it is the reason behind the name.

They were basically ships, motorised by steam engines that drive paddle wheels to help the ships run through the water. Rocket steamers are designed in a way that there are very rare chances of sinking. However, in the mid nineties, the steam engines were converted into diesel-run engines; and afterwards, were replaced by electro-hydraulic engines. The roofs have also been replaced with tin sheets that have now rusted and retain an archaic look.

Currently, after so many ups and downs, rocket steamers—namely PS Ostrich, PS Lepcha, PS Tern, MV Madhumati and MV Bangali are being operated once a day (starts at 4 pm), from Badamtali Ghat, Sadarghat to Morelganj. Apart from these, another significant steamer, PS Mashud has been kept in the dockyard, as it is undergoing repair. Each steamer has an arrangement to accommodate around 700-800 passengers at a time.

At first sight, the dilapidated torpedo-shaped two storey vessels may generate a simple question in your mind—how can this be a sign of aristocracy? The wide-loaded junks, damp decks, the bad odour from the contaminated waters may seem to be just the opposite.

However, a closer look at the ramshackle ships will give you a splendid idea of their unique designs. Most of them were made in the Garden Rich Workshop of Calcutta, nearly a hundred year ago, while the PS Ostrich was made in the dockyards of Clydebank, Scotland.

“If we want to give them a very glamorous look, we will lose the heritage value”, says Nazrul Islam Misha, Public Relation Officer, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC). “As they are being operated since nearly a hundred years ago, the outlook has lost its prior glint, but we have already introduced ships—MV Bangali and MV Madhumati, which were made according to the paddle steamer patterns”, he adds. “We try our best to maintain maximum cleanliness, which is very difficult.”

These steamers have a distinct style of operation. While leaving the *ghaat*, they play a majestic whistle known as the ‘*Bhepu*’, and move forward plying the water. There was a time when many butlers wearing special attires, would wait in front of the 1st class cabins to take orders from passengers. In addition, there used to be special arrangement of

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PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

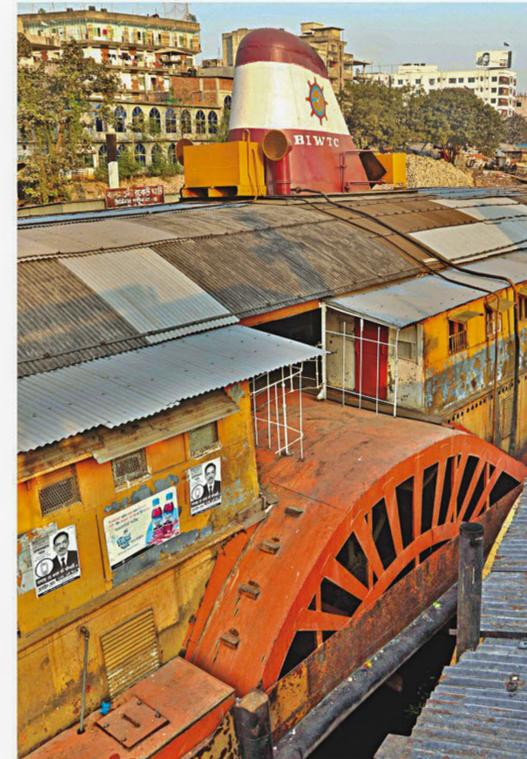
mouth-watering dishes at a very reasonable price. But, over the years, the scenario has changed immensely. Now, along with the decks, the steamers offer AC and Non AC cabins, and little snack-shops and eateries have been placed.

In most of the steamers, one might find the small-cabins open off to either side, having two narrow beds and a television. Also, the toilets are maintained by a man with a key and one needs to find him in order to use them. On the contrary, the decks are still populated by those who cannot afford the cabins. The sunset accompanying the departure helps create beautiful landscapes for the travellers.

As these steamers were very hyped about earlier, many renowned personalities, for instances – Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation, Hason Raja, popular Bengali poet and songwriter, Kazi Nazrul Islam, our national poet, and many others have travelled on them. (Source: BIWTC)

“Today we can see thousands of speedy modern water transports, but rocket steamers are always different”, believes 65-year-old Khizir Hayat Khan, a retired government employee who was travelling to Hularhat, Pirojpur. “It’s like an ancient relic in a modern world— full of memories for people of all ages”, he adds.

“In 1972, after we got married, we always preferred coming to Dhaka by rocket steamers. Coming out of the 1st class cabin that we would always hire, we used to spend the whole night without a wink of sleep, enjoying the calmness of the rivers Kirtanakhola, Arial



According to historians, the paddle steamer service was introduced in the late 18th century by the British India General Navigation Railway Company (IGNRC).

After the partition of Bengal, Pakistan River Steamers Company introduced this rocket steamer service in 1952, which familiarised as a symbol of speed, safety and nobility. At that time, six rockets were operated twice a week, from Narayanganj to Khulna, via Chandpur, Barisal and Jhalakathi. Later, in 1972, BIWTC was formed and it took all the responsibilities of this service.

khan, Padma, Meghna, Shitalakshya and Buriganga”, reminisces 57-year-old Ismat Ara, wife of Khizir Hayat.

Like Khizir Hayat Khan and Ismat Ara, there are so many people around the country who have nostalgia associated with this steamer service. Even today many foreigners who come to Bangladesh find this journey quite appealing, so they make sure to have it in their itinerary.

“It happens many a time that people from abroad come to visit Bangladesh only for a rocket steamer trip”, says 30-year-old Ariful Islam Arif, a ticket seller of the rocket steamer service.

Upon entering the small control room on the roof, you will find that the entire system is mainly operated by three people—the master, the *sukani* (the man who turns the steering wheel from the center) and the pilot.

“Many love this service for the unquestionable safety assurance, as we operate very cautiously”, says 50-year-old Nurul Islam, a *sukani*, who has been working for the rockets for past eight years. “Besides, we ensure maximum safety measures and equipment.”

Nonetheless, compared to the faster modern modes of water transports, the rocket steamers may take 20 hours to reach Morelganj from Dhaka. Nevertheless, a trip in a rocket steamer will give you an unforgettable experience—the river banks, lush greeneries adjacent to the rivers, under-siege paddy fields and much more. You can even get a chance to visit the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world. As a matter of fact, every year, BIWTC, the authority responsible for maintaining the service, offers a free of cost rocket ride for freedom fighters and their family members to enjoy the serenity of the beautiful Sundarbans.

Unfortunately, as the number of the passengers is decreasing because of the growing competition and high maintenance cost; the service is running on the Government’s subsidy. Nonetheless, if we all come forward and travel through the rocket steamers frequently, the service will get the prior lively ambience. It is our duty to preserve these historic rocket steamers that can be a gift of antiquity for our future generations. ■

