

WANDERLUST: WINTER EDITION

AATEEYA SAABEEN

For some of us, travelling is an option to take a break from the hectic schedule and adrenaline-filled-deadline-induced panic that we face all the time; for the rest, it's a necessity. Whatever the reason might be, it gives us a chance to slow down, to rediscover ourselves, to let our hair down and embrace our inner wanderer spirit. Luckily for us, there are tons of places in our small country to visit that satiate the wanderlust. With the end-of-the-year holidays coming up, this seems to be the perfect time to take that break. Here are some travel destinations that you should check out.

Saint Martin's Island: Imagine walking by a sandy beach without having to deal with a huge crowd and noisy surrounding, or simply lying in a hammock and watching the seagulls fly in the clear blue sky. Imagine being surrounded by your friends on a moonlit night and having a quiet beach barbecue. Cox's Bazar surely gets up your party spirit, but if your definition of a perfect beach entails taking a walk on a coral island, relaxing in a deck chair on the beach, or scuba diving with schooling fish – without the hassles that large crowds cause, this is the place you've been looking for. Being the only coral island in Bangladesh, Saint Martin has caught the attention of tourists over the past few years. The peak season for going there is from September to March, so most of the hotels get booked by the start of tourist season. There are resorts and hotels that offer you a chance to show you around the island, arrange barbecue parties, or rent a hammock. The most common complaint from the tourists is the

unavailability of 24/7 electricity, but you can get clear cellular network from any part of the island. The hotel rooms cost around BDT 1500-2500 (per night/per person) and offer decent service. If you're there, don't forget to check out Shamudra Bilash, the beach house of the late writer and filmmaker Humayun Ahmed. There are opportunities for parasailing or scuba diving and there are places where you can get the gears and other equipment. A visit to Saint Martin's island is not complete until you go to Chhera Dwip, an extended part of the island that is generally uninhabited and costs BDT 200 per person for an up and down trip.

You can easily board a night coach from Dhaka to Teknaf that approximately costs around BDT 800-2000 per person. If you're starting from Cox's Bazar, it would take you around 3 hours on a shared "Chander Gari" or a bus to get to Teknaf. After that, you can board a small ship or boat (locally known as "service trawler") to Saint Martin's

Island that would cost you around BDT 550-2000 per person. No other transportation other than rickshaw is available on the island, but it is small enough for travellers to cover by foot.

Sajek Valley, Rangamati: How would it feel to see the sun peeking under the grey cloud at the break of dawn and seeing the start of a new day? How would it feel to sit on top of a mountain slope, waiting to see the sunset over the horizon and seeing the day coming to an end? Sajek Valley gives you a chance to check all of that on your own. There's no need to worry about safety because Bangladesh Army provides secure escort service to the tourists. The valley is known as the "Queen of Hills and Roof of Rangamati". For sightseeing around this place, you can go to Alutula cave, a 100-metre long cave with water flowing at the bottom. The cave is so dark and mysterious that you need to carry torches to see your surroundings. It might sound ominous now, but seeing the light at the end of that tunnel turns out

to be the most attractive part of the journey. If you're into trekking, you can explore Kanglak Para that would take about 30 minutes from the Army base camp to get to and watch sunset from the highest peak, which is about 2400 feet high. Lastly, Richhang waterfalls and Hajachhora waterfalls are two of the underrated places that should be on your checklist.

To get to Sajek Valley, you need to board a bus to Khagrachhari town. After reaching there, it costs BDT 50-100 to get to Dighinala upazilla in a CNG driven vehicle. From there, you can hire a Chander Gari, a four-wheeled vehicle that can accommodate around 8-14 people and costs around BDT 4000-7000 for a round trip. Decent hotels and resorts are available for the tourists wishing to stay there but those can be a bit costly. To minimise cost, it's best to travel in groups of 8 to 10 people because it's easier to rent cars and hotel rooms that way.

Nafakhum-Amiakhum waterfalls, Bandarban: This one

is for all the adventurous souls out there, who are constantly looking for new challenges to take on. Nothing can measure up to the adrenaline rush that you get after jumping off a waterfall into the roaring water that was frothing below seconds ago. If you're looking for a trip that involves both trekking up hills and getting a chance to swim, Nafakhum and Amiakhum waterfalls offer you both. Knowing how to swim is a must for this area because after taking a small trip on a boat, you need to cross a bit by swimming. Non-swimmers are generally discouraged by the guides, and even if they're on the trip, they're advised to take life jackets with them.

To get there, you need to board a bus from Dhaka to Bandarban that's going to cost you around BDT 650-2000, depending on your choice of bus service. The journey would take about 7 to 9 hours. After reaching Bandarban, you can travel to Thanchi by car. The journey would take around 4-5 hours. From Thanchi, you can go to different

points of Bandarban such as Tindu, Remakri, Nafakhum by motorboat which would cost you BDT 4000-12000 and take you 2-7 hours, depending on the number of stoppages you want to have before you get to your destination and the total distance. You must hire a guide who can show you the way but it would cost around BDT 500-1000 a day. For staying in Thanchi, wooden cottages are available for rent. Those are safe and clean, but it's necessary to take bug repellent and mosquito nets.

So, what are you waiting for? Pack your bags, take some warm clothes, and fuel your wanderlust!

Aateeya Saabeen, who scarily resembles a koala in looks and in sleeping patterns, likes to take day-long walks with her lobster. She believes her Hogwarts letter got lost in the mail because they misspelled her name. Leave her a message at www.facebook.com/aateeya.saabeen



PHOTOS: DARSHAN CHAKMA & SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

