



A group of travellers seen walking on the beach in Teknaf as part of an event called Teknaf-Cox's Bazar Beach Hiking, organised by the travel club Vromon Bangladesh on December 22-24, 2017.

PHOTO: KHALID HASAN KHAN SANJIB

# Walking the longest path with my favourite ghosts

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My heart jumped as I looked at the bus. It was past ten-thirty already. Tired and exasperated from having to wait in a ramshackle waiting room for what seemed like ages, I approached the bus for a closer look, and found myself frowning. Usually I like buses that inspire confidence, make me feel welcome. What I had before me was quite the opposite. A weary-looking vehicle with poor suspension and loose-fitting glass panels that probably rattled with every bump. Ten hours of being tossed around in this roller coaster, hemmed in from all sides by people and luggage, didn't seem like an agreeable prospect.

The first bus had already left, carrying the first batch of our team. The rest would be wedged into whatever came next. That was the deal. We didn't have much choice because we were already three hours behind schedule. I found the seat reserved for me. And tried to make myself comfortable. If this is how I had to travel over 450 kilometres, so be it.

So here I was, set to embark on the toughest adventure trip of my life. Not the daunting bus journey from Dhaka to Teknaf, but what came after it: a 90-km hike along the longest sea beach in the world.

The Teknaf-Cox's Bazar Beach Hiking is a flagship event of the travel club Vromon Bangladesh, which has been organising it every year with the exception of one since 2008. It was a kind of trip, I was told, that required passion and precision, courage, physical fitness, and above all, strong resolve. To me, as much as to those who had signed up for the thrill of it, it seemed like a rodeo minus the horses.

When we reached Teknaf, it was nearly 3 pm. The promised 10-hour ride had ended after 16 hours. Although I had slept away most of the time, it was difficult not to feel a sense of relief when it was finally over. We got down, freshened up and changed into lighter clothing. The team comprised 55 members, mostly male and some female, as well as some children who came with their parents.

As I look back now, after three weeks since that balmy Friday afternoon, everything about that trip seems like the stuff of dreams: a beach the sheer length of which I knew of only as a piece of information, with no images to connect the dots; a beautiful marine drive that runs parallel to the beach for almost the entire length; a kind of hiking that requires travellers to overcome insurmountable obstacles. The stage was set—all I needed to do was make my mark.



A red crab on the beach.

PHOTO: ANAMUL HASAN

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We reached the Marine Drive near Teknaf Beach, the starting point for our hiking, after another half an hour's drive via a local van. The beach with its shimmering sands and calm blue sea looked inviting. Soon we left the rough concrete and walked down to the beach. The team had broken into smaller groups by then. The journey ahead was a long one, so we started hiking without delay, some getting further down to wade through the surf. Others, mindful of the distance, chose a straight line. Everywhere we turned, the unspoiled beauty of nature shone through.

Walking for a long time can be monotonous but not when you have a purpose, and an ocean as company. I could see a chain of hills and towering cliffs on the other side of the drive, punctuated by households and croplands, which looked more and more like faded memory as the sun began to go down and a blanket of fog covered the beach.

The first day's hike ended after we reached South Shilkhali in Baharchhara Union. We spent the night at a local cyclone centre. For dinner, we had *polao*, beef curry and mixed vegetable salad. I was curious about my tourmates with whom, until then, I had little contact. Each person seemed to come from a different background, barely knowing each other, and yet somehow, they gelled into a team. Is it, I wondered, the commonness of our purpose that binds us together?

I met a newlywed couple, Anamul Hasan and Nusrat Babar Nancy, who had first met during a tour like this, and found their purpose in each other. Hasan told me that he had always wanted a life partner who would encourage him to "never stop expedition." Now, they travel together.

Another travel enthusiast, Roniul Islam Roni, said he had no purpose in life. "None!" he insisted, as I asked again, but then added that if there

ever was anything that came close to being a purpose, it was travelling. There were also Abu Bakker Siddeak, Shahadat Hossain Sarker, Mahbub Rashid, Tahin Hassan Chowdhury, Khalid Hasan Khan Sanjib, Aditta Rahman Robi, and Md Toslim Khan—people for whom wanderlust is a perpetual state of mind. Rafiq Ul Alam, the fifty-plus explorer who carried himself with enviable confidence. Another man introduced himself as Shahinoor Araihaazari. He said he replaced his last name with that of his village in Narayanganj, and promotes it in every way he can.

After dinner, we stood facing the campfire built outside the cyclone centre. I looked up the sky to see a slender new crescent moon and the faint outlines of a few tattered clouds. In the distance, there were some villagers looking at us. They seemed friendly but cautious enough not to approach. Arshad Hossain Tutul, the charismatic leader of Vromon Bangladesh, while trying to stoke the flames with gasoline, explained how the club had received continuous support from the local populace during past trips, and how that was reciprocated.

"We promote responsible tourism wherever we go," he said. "We encourage our members to respect local culture and tradition, and keep the environment clean."

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"Great things are done when men and mountains meet"—I feel tempted to take the William Blake quote both literally and metaphorically. For what happened on the second and third days involved mountainous challenges in the sight of mountains. In a way, both days were interchangeable given that all we did was to walk, from early morning until after the sunset.

We walked and we rested. Then we walked again, as if driven by the ghosts of Odysseus and his sailors who wouldn't let us give up. Our

Ithaca was the Kolatoli Beach. I had been quite confident initially, because I had hiked in the woods and mountains before, but my confidence was soon about to be shaken.

Like the first day, the team soon broke into threes and fours. Then the fishing boats came. Stretched over mile after mile, the boats reminded me of *The Old Man and the Sea* although fishing has become more of a group performance these days. There were many groups, each containing about 40 people, give or take a few. The fishermen, upon returning from their trips, were greeted at the shore like it was

the wet type and then there is the not-so-wet type. Some are soft and powdery; others, especially if you have sore feet, will make you want to cry.

We passed a giant dead turtle. Some of us indulged in a debate over how the rabbit vs turtle fable applies to hikers. Sea turtle is actually a blessing for the fishing community. It eats jellyfish, which is deadly for the smaller fish varieties. So they protect turtle eggs. The eggs are first relocated for hatching. Then the baby turtles are preserved for five months, after which they are released back into the sea. This gives

keep her going. The courage and stamina of Nadira Sultana Ava, who had pulled herself out of another trip from her office to be a part of this, was also quite inspiring.

We covered the longest distance on the second day, and the second-longest on the final day. Finally, when we reached the safety of Kolatoli Beach in Cox's Bazar on Sunday night, with pain and fatigue so extreme that I doubt there is a name for it, the length of our hiking path had come down to about 80 kilometres, because of the delay in the initial phases.

And only 36 out of the 55 people



A view of the sea with sea birds and plastic floats.

PHOTO: MUKTADIR MAHFUJ JAMEEL

homecoming. It was now up to their associates to pull the fishing nets spread in deep waters. We passed groups of people surrounding mounds of freshly caught fish, haggling over their prices.

Unable to resist the temptation, we bought a hundred taka's worth of fish, cleaned and prepped them, and grilled them with the few spices we had until they were crispy. As we bit into them, I realised I had never put my barbecuing skills to better use.

The beach is mostly an endless stretch of sand. But it's not spotless, thanks to the rowdy tourists who drop litter without a second thought. You could occasionally see groves of tamarisk (*jhau*) trees and some hastily built shacks that looked mostly deserted. You could seek shelter in the grove if you needed but sand and its unique biodiversity is what makes the beach. There are mainly two types of sand, but a hiker knows sand from how it feels under their feet. There is

the community a chance to thwart potential jellyfish invasions. Elephant invasion in the hillside villages is another challenge that locals sometimes have to face.

Thus we moved on, mile after mile, gaining new knowledge and insights into the realities of coastal Bangladesh.

By midday, my legs began to give out. There was pain in my ankles, calf muscles and knees, which spread to other parts of the body in the afternoon. By nightfall, when I reached our Inani camp, where we would spend the second night, it felt like my legs were pricked by a thousand needles.

That I was able to trek again the next morning, and indeed touch the finish line after another gruelling daylong hike on the beach, was nothing short of a miracle. But it was Nancy who set the bar for others. She finished the day's hike even after her legs had stiffened so much that she had to bind them with ropes, to

were able to make it.

Now that I look back, more than the pain and the relief that came afterwards, more than the hospitality that we received from strangers, more than the kids masquerading as Rohingya near Baharchhara, asking for money, more than the live snails that I caught accidentally, or the ever-distrustful red crabs and sea-birds, more than the abandoned "pirate ships" that gave us shelter, more than the beautiful Rezu Khal, more than the kind fishing folks who helped us, the colossal sand-filled geobags that adorned the Marine Drive, or the lonely kite near Himchhari Waterfall, more than the mysterious cliffs that accompanied us all the way, and more than all the fun and festivities—I miss exploring the beach with my favourite ghosts.

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