

On November 26 last year, my wife and I decided to visit Brunei on a long-pending invitation from our son, Shahriar Shams Rony, who works as a teacher at the Universiti Teknologi Brunei (UTB). His insistence for the last two years that we pay a visit to his residence overseas—we were to realise later—didn't merely reflect a son's desire for a family reunion away from home or to show how his newly raised family was doing in an expatriate environment. We felt it also stemmed from a belief my son held that Brunei Darussalam has features that characterise it as a unique tourist destination.

Indeed, after visiting Brunei Darussalam, I found that it was a lovely and peaceful country surrounded by the sea, with carpeted roads meandering up and down without any traffic on the streets. Climate-wise, it is a tropical country with heavy rainfall and bright sunshine, with temperatures varying from 23–32 degrees Celsius. The majority of the country is covered in forests, and the land in many parts is still virgin, ready to be utilised for a rich variety of agriculture. The people breathe unpolluted air and drink fresh water, and the country imports quality-controlled groceries that satisfy the needs of its citizens, and needless to say, those of its foreign visitors.

Brunei is a constitutional sultanate state that can be traced back to the 15th century. It was a part of Borneo, which included the states of Sabah and Sarawak of Malaysia. In 1959, Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddien Saadul Khairi Waddien introduced a written constitution for Bruneians, which established Islam as the state religion. Muslims in Brunei Darussalam constitute 78 percent of the population followed by Christians who constitute eight percent and Buddhists seven; the rest are agnostic.

The present and 29th Sultan, Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah ibni Al-Marhum, is the Prime Minister, Defence and Finance Minister, and Head of Religion of the country. He is advised by five constitutional bodies—the Council of Succession, the Council of Cabinet Ministers, the Privy Council, the Religious Council and the State Legislative Council. The State Legislative Council consists of Cabinet Ministers,



Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque, Bandar Seri Begawan

BRUNEI DARUSSALAM PARADISE ON EARTH

M SHAMSUR RAHMAN



Royal Regalia Museum

Local Dignitaries, and people who achieved distinctions in business, society and religion as well as district representatives.

With an area of 2,225 square miles and a population of 450,000, Brunei is a very tiny state. It consists of four districts, namely Brunei Muara (which hosts the capital city Bandar Seri Begawan), Tamburong, Belait and Tutong. District

towns are very well-planned, and replete with forests, rivers and waterbodies.

Bandar Seri Begawan is lush green with beautiful parks. The leaves of the trees are evergreen from steady rainfall throughout the year. But as a tropical country, sunshine is aplenty. The afternoon breeze emanating from the sea embraces the capital and the heavy rain keeps the road so clean that not a single

leaf can be seen.

The Bruneian capital is a refreshing change from Dhaka as everyone is law-abiding and follows driving rules. There is hardly any overtaking or mad rush. Even if by chance an accident takes place, the car owner stops and reports it to the police—there are no hit and runs. Respect for law is the guiding principle in everyone's daily life.

The country has six glorious beaches along the coastline. On the other side of the sea is a river, divided by the road heading towards Malaysia. By the side of this road are beautifully designed mosques and restaurants—spotless, where snacks and fruits abound. Washrooms and toilets are kept so clean that one feels that he is the first user.

A gentle breeze flows from the sea and reinvigorates the body. Green forests, descending like a mountain, engulf the river bank.

The highway connecting the sea beach is also covered by deep forests on both sides. Surprisingly the forests by the road are free of wild animals like tigers, lions and bears.

An account of Brunei is not complete without a description of the architectural beauty of its mosques and their intricate interiors. There are over 200 mosques in Brunei city, built from marble chips, their domes covered in gold and bronze petals, their floors carpeted in vibrant spreads.

The country's tourism authority is keen on capturing the country's heritage and culture. Two of its four museums are open to visitors while the other two are currently undergoing renovation. The first museum in the city is known as Royal Regalia Museum, where His Majesty's coronation is depicted in the form of lively statues. The other, the Natural History, Technology and Culture Museum, is located on the riverside, three miles away from the main city.

The people of Brunei live in harmony under His Majesty's rule. They love and respect him and pray every Friday for his long life. To them, he is Plato's Philosopher King who'd devoted his life to the happiness and safety of his people. As children, we would hear Kashmir being called "Paradise on Earth", but to me, it is Brunei that is Paradise on Earth.

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| TRAVEL |

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THE KITE FLYERS OF OLD DHAKA

*Walking through
Shakrain, the festival
of kites on a cold
winter evening*

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

As the rickshaw, painted bright with a distorted Bengal tiger and even more distorted images of Dhallywood stars, breaks through the sea of other rickshaws, the kites appear almost suddenly through the narrow old Dhaka skyline.

It is a sea of colours, almost as though humongous, mutant butterflies have laid siege to the Old Dhaka sky.

Always tormented by nostalgia and of memories from another time, the scenes of busy rooftops, old crumbling mansions and the passionate screams of kite flyers quickly take me back to the time I was reading *The Kite Runner*, a book by Khaled Hosseini, now a household name.

In the book, the schools close for the icy season, and boys spend this time flying kites. Baba takes Amir and Hassan to buy kites from an old blind man who makes the best in the city. The highlight of winter is the annual kite-fighting tournament, when boys battle kites by covering the strings in broken glass.

For me, it was like being thrown into scenes from the book and old Bollywood movies, names of which I find difficult to remember now.

Kite flying and the festivities surrounding it is not simply unique to our region or to any religion alone. Residents of old Dhaka start preparing for Shakrain, celebrated on the last days of Poush, the end of the ninth month in the Bengali calendar from weeks back. Poush is the first month of winter in the Bengali calendar. There is another month of winter left—Maagh.

Here in Old Dhaka, Shakrain, is a veritable carnival of colourful kites, fireworks, fire-breathers, paper lanterns, old school games and food.

It's being celebrated here since the Mughal period, says resident Ishti: "My family is Muslim but there was never any talk of not celebrating this festival. After all, Shakrain has been celebrated from the Mughal times, probably even before!"

For another Old Dhaka resident, Taposh Ghosh, an undergraduate student of the Institute of Business Administration at Dhaka University,

Shakrain means going down memory lane. "I used to look forward to going to Narinda, my maternal grandparents' house. All the festivities happened there."

I get down from the rickshaw where the narrow lane paves way to the narrower 'goli' of Shankhari Bazaar, an almost 400-year-old neighbourhood. The narrow lane is lined with jewellery stores casting a golden-yellow hue from the gold ornaments showcased inside the glass windows. There is the smell of incense and syrupy laddus in the air.

Everywhere there is chaos. Although celebrations start from morning, it is dusk by the time the pace picks up.

"We start preparing from weeks back at least. There is a lot of work. Buying the right kites and then preparing them for war takes time you know," says Pratik, a teen from the Shankhari Bazar area.

For Old Dhaka residents, Shakrain is not simply about flying kites. They are at play here. From each rooftop, competition ensues. In the kite fight, the aim is to slice the other flier's string with your own, sending the defeated kite teetering to the ground.

The kite string is coated with a resin made of glue and finely crushed glass, which turns it into a blade. This is done weeks in advance.

"I managed to cut 26 kites today so I guess it is a relatively good Shakrain for me," said a grinning Pratik.

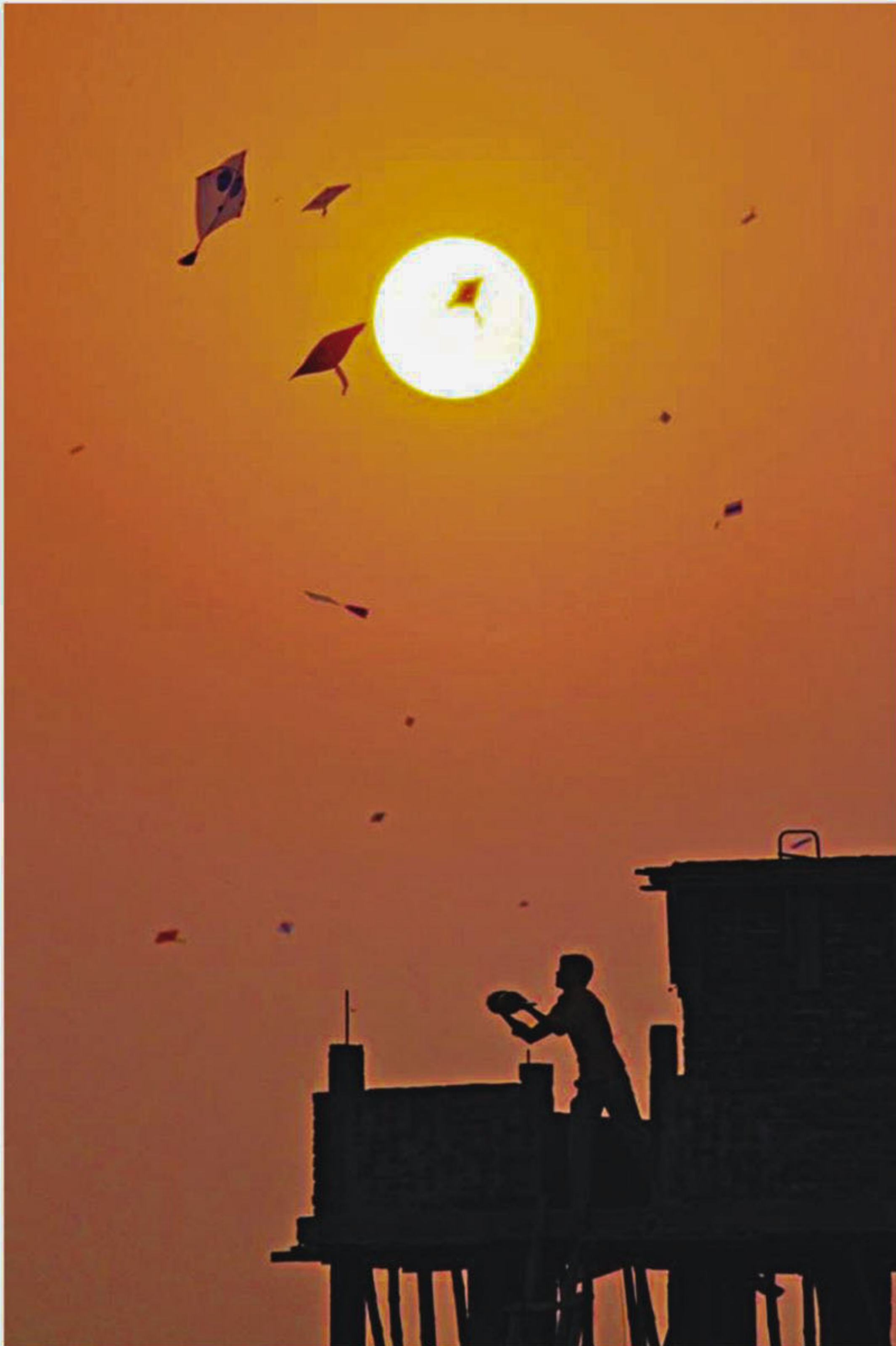


PHOTO: MD MOAZZEM MOSTAKIM



PHOTO: STAR FILE

Here, kites have different names based on their shapes, sizes and designs, such as hearts, goggles, squares, eyes and the traditional kite shape.

As the sun sets, a new kind of party kicks in. Old Dhaka becomes modernised. The old and new mingle seamlessly. Old Bangla songs from one roof intermingle with Linkin' Park from another roof. Light shows paint the city red, green and blue. Fireworks go up as though everyone is in some Olympics game vying for top firecracker spot.

"It is as though the whole neighbourhood is partying. We only see scenes like this in the movies," says Rahnuma, a Dhanmondi resident who was visiting Shakrain for the first time. She also talks about the stark differences that still remains between Old Dhaka and New Dhaka.

"I still do not know any of my neighbours in my building in Dhanmondi. But here, people are having full-fledged conversations between rooftops," says Rahnuma.

The light shows and fireworks go on late into the night. Plates of food keep piling up. Pithas, samosas, bottles of Coke litter the floor.

Shakrain is often celebrated on two consecutive days by the people in Old Dhaka depending on their locality. One day of the celebrations is based on the English calendar and the other is based on the Bengali Calendar.

This day is also celebrated by the Hindu community in India, Nepal and Bangladesh in many cultural forms, with a variety of names like—'Maghe sangkranti', (Nepal), 'Saakrat' (Delhi and Haryana), 'Uttarayan' (Gujarat), 'Maghi' (Punjab) and many more.

I made my way back home when the celebrations were going on full pace and I thought of 'Googling' why celebrations matter and why they are so important to us, irrespective of race or religion. Google answered me with many quotes, the gist of which boil down to this: without festivals, how would communities come together?How would there be fervour and excitement that break the mundanity of living in this urban jungle?

Abida Rahman Chowdhury is an online journalist, The Daily Star

ABOUT TOWN

Emotional Intelligence for Success

so Jan Saturday
4 pm to 7 pm
EMK Center

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE FOR SUCCESS

Organiser: Mind Mechanics
January 20, 4-7 pm, EMK Center, Dhanmondi

CHA- CHAKRA

TEA TALES OF BANGLADESH

Organiser: Alliance Française de Dhaka
January 19-26, 4.30-8 pm, Alliance Française de Dhaka, Dhanmondi

16th DHAKA INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2018

Organiser: Bangladesh National Museum
January 12-20, 12 am- 11 pm, Bangladesh National Museum