

CHANGES THAT MAKE US #NOWINLIFESTYLE



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PHOTO: SAKIB AHMED



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In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks. —JON MUIR

SAKIB AHMED

Every time I wander out for a walk outdoors, however short that may be, I have always returned satiated. One feels more profoundly connected to the earth and the environment when one is exploring on feet, rather than on a motorised vehicle. Your senses heightened, as you take in the sights and sounds, and the brain receives the stimuli that it craves from new experiences and exploration. And this is what treks are; a long walk that has a lot more to offer.

During treks, you observe, more deeply, as you slow down and notice the details that would have been impossible to see if you had been on a vehicle. On long treks, there is a sense of liberation and a chance to be footloose. You carry everything you need on your back; from your clothes to beddings, tent and food. You can take a nap under a tree or watch the clouds float by above the hills, tuning in to the harmonious orchestra that only nature can conduct. You can almost slow down time as you connect deeply, almost spiritually, with your surroundings. The ancient act of walking, the simple putting of one step after the another, is medita-

tive and long treks through nature gives the opportunity to reflect and appreciate beauty in many of its forms.

Sometimes the trek is adventurous, strenuous and even dangerous, going through difficult terrains, but any trek always has the ability to surprise you. Treks give a chance to immerse yourself completely in the moment, where the only thing that's important is where you place your next step. And an opportunity to test yourself, both physically and mentally.

It is no wonder then that trekking is now a very popular outdoor activity all over the world. Bangladesh, being one of the densely populated countries, does have some wonderfully scenic and spectacular trails that can take the trekkers through some diverse landscapes and experiences.

We are seeing a growing number of trekkers willing to explore the world on their feet and go for walks through the unknown. Even a few years ago, trekking was not as popular as it is now. In those days, only the hardcore explorers and trekkers ventured out and blazed the trails for other to follow and discover for themselves. Thanks to them, a commu-

nity has been established that have taken this outdoor activity to the heart.

A WALK THROUGH SINGRA NATIONAL PARK

The National Park in the northern district of Dinajpur is a wonderful sal forest that offers a pleasant trek through the sylvan coolness. There is a small stream that has to be crossed to enter the forest. A few years ago, the stream had to be waded across, but now there is a bridge.

The forest itself is magical, with large sal trees filtering the forest trails in a mosaic of light and shade. Walking through the forest offers a calmness as one can listen to calls of a plethora of birds, including orioles and drongos.

Just off the forest trail, massive termite mounds can be spotted, some even larger than people and enormous spider-webs with colourful giant wood spiders dangling in the middle. Sudden calls of junglefowls or a rushing of monitor lizards through the undergrowth might surprise you.

You will encounter members of the indigenous Santal community deep in the forest paths. A Santal village is just on

in winter and one can start the trek as late as 9AM in the morning. It is best to take assistance from locals who can guide you through the forest.

LAWACHARA TREK

Lawachara National Park, in Srimangal of Moulvibazar district, is probably one of my most visited forests in the country, and one that offers a glimpse of the grandeur of the olden days where the forests were truly impenetrable. These days, one can hire a guide and go on treks inside the forest.

Two treks are available, one is a 30-minute walk and the other is 3-hours long. You can take eco-guides who work closely with the local Forest Department and you can contact a guide from the local forest office. For a small fee, one can take assistance from these guides.

The forest itself is incredibly diverse and the trek will take you through a range of micro-habitats. The three-hour trail winds through deep inside the forest, through bamboo groves, and large chapalish trees, down hilly charas or forest streams.

The woodland is usually teeming with birds, especially in winter. Every now and then, the forest echoes in the haunting

and trekkers should be well prepared. It is advisable not to undertake this walk without professional guides.

The trekker must be wearing proper footwear as the forest floor is littered with bamboo spikes and other hazards.

During the rainy season, the trails are slippery and attacks from leeches are common, but the leeches are usually harmless and cause no major damage. Carrying a hat, an insect repellent, sunscreen, a water-bottle, some dry food, an umbrella and a raincoat is advisable.

HUM HUM WATERFALL TREK

This breath-taking waterfall lies deep in the remote Rajkandi Reserve Forest and offers a unique opportunity to walk through mystical hilly boulder strewn jhirior stream with crystal clear water trickling through.

The Rajkandi forest is in Moulvibazar district. To reach the waterfall, one has to undertake a tough 3-hour trek, that takes the trekker up and down forested hills and valleys down to the stream that would eventually lead to the waterfall.

The stream is narrow and peaceful with large mossy rocks, trees and bamboo groves reaching high on both sides. The sunlight filters through the greenery,



PHOTO: SAKIB AHMED



A trekker's guide to BANGLADESH

the other side of the forest. Following the forest trails will lead you to the village. The quaint surrounding will offer you a glimpse into the simple lives of the community.

Beautifully decorated with hand painted murals, the traditional mud houses line the sides of the rural earthen roads, and men and women can be seen working in the fields, while children run around the village. You can fill your water bottle and have a quiet adda with villagers and if you are lucky can even be invited to lunch at one of their houses.

There is an old church at one end of the village that you can visit. Later you can return to the forest and take a different trail back to the starting point.

The trek through Singra is a relatively easy one that can be enjoyed with the family. Best time to visit would be

calls of the Hoolock Gibbons. These primates are considered globally endangered and if lucky, you might catch families of them swinging from one tree to another with their little babies tucked close to the mother's chest.

Crisscrossing through the groves of bamboo, crossing wooden bridges and walking through charas (streams) with sandy beds and clear water, you will find yourself in a Khasi village. The Khasi are an ethnic group and have two villages named Magurchara Punji and Lawachara Punji, in the core zone of the forest. Visiting the villages gives a unique opportunity to catch a peek into the lives of this community living in harmony with the forest.

The village is clean with traditional Khasi households. The community has betel leaf plantations in the forest that is sustainable and eco-friendly. Towards the end, the trek can take you to the edge of the forest through pineapple and lemon gardens.

At the entrance of Lawachara National Park, there is a little gift shop run by the local people that sells traditional articles like clothes, and you can also enjoy the famed seven layered tea at Lawachara!

The 30-minute hike is easy and can be done with the family and little ones. However, the 3-hour trek is much harder

reflecting off the high green walls and clear water, is finally absorbed by the large mossy rocks.

The trek through the stream is in an emerald world inside a fairy-tale. The sound of water flowing over rocks is soothing and offers the trekker a chance to reflect and inhale the beauty of the place.

One can sit on the large boulders listening to the forest surrounding the stream. Many birds and animals use the stream for drinking and bathing. If one remains quiet and respectful, birds like Abbott's babbler and fantails can be seen coming down for a drink or a wash. If the traveller is really lucky, a chance encounter with a barking deer is not unusual.

The jade stream finally leads to the Hum Hum waterfall. The sound of the fall is audible even before one has a glimpse of it. The sound only heightens the anticipation and a sudden bend reveals the cascading waters falling into a large pool at the base.

The trekker can wade into the pool with clean water, take a dip and be completely rejuvenated. After a quick bath and some food, trekkers can return back the same way or if equipped with tents and food, can stay the night camping by the waterfall and turn back the next morning.

The trek to Hum Hum is a difficult one and should only be undertaken if one is physically fit and experienced. Locals can be taken as guides and walking sticks can be hired from near the start of the trek. The best way to reach the starting point is from Srimangal. From there, one can take a CNG autorickshaw to Kolabagan Para at Champarai Tea Estate, the last village before the reserve forest begins.

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