

Finding Bangladesh in Paris

MAISHA ZAMAN

In October 2021, my flat mate and I embarked on a trip to – let's just not disclose the destination – after spontaneously booking flights just three days before. We considered ourselves extremely lucky as we had a 12-hour transit in Paris, which meant that we could spend a few hours in the beautiful city. Little did we know, those 12 hours would turn into a week.

After some back and forth in Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport, the largest international airport in France, we managed to get out and take a bus to our first destination – the Eiffel Tower, as one might have guessed already. We spent some time in awe there, mesmerised by the massive structure, which was once the tallest building in the world and a “wonder of the world”. Although it has lost both statuses, the Eiffel Tower continues to garner attraction from tourists all around the world. I had heard that Paris, and particularly the Eiffel Tower, is a spot for lovers to display their affection towards each other; I can now safely validate this.

After clicking some “touristy” photos, we decided to stop by at the Louvre, oblivious to the fact that our plans were going to take a crazy turn from there onwards. We were amazed by the area around the museum, especially in the evening. All the peace and quiet amidst the crowd and structures seemed too good to be true for a while.

A while after, it was time for us to pick up our luggage, which we had kept aside for five minutes, only to discover that someone had utilised those minutes to their benefit and robbed my flat mate off her most important possession – her purse – containing her passport, phone, money, cards and essentially, our trip. Soon, the integrity of the whole issue dawned upon us. My flat mate was abroad, in a country where she didn't speak the language, with me, who was in as much trouble, if not more. Panicking, I somehow managed to



PHOTOS: MAISHA ZAMAN

even gave us hope of finding her belongings. Desperate, we decided to stay at a nearby hotel for the night, mostly thinking how to manage all the paperwork the next day. We did not know if we were heading back to the UK (where we are currently studying) or if my friend was going to be deported to Sri Lanka, her home country.

With all these overwhelming thoughts, we headed out to buy dinner, and surprisingly stumbled upon a Bangladeshi store. After hearing about our sorry state, the shopkeeper *mama* tried to console us by offering free dessert. I was even more surprised to find yet another Bangladeshi shop nearby and spent a few minutes chit-chatting with the shopkeeper who tried his best to persuade me to think about moving to France. Given the cost of living in the UK for a yearlong Master's, the option was probably worth considering.

The next morning, we went to the British Embassy, where we were suggested we go to the Sri Lankan Embassy. Carrying our luggage and trying out local French food to gather all the energy we would require throughout the day, we finally ended up at the Sri Lankan Embassy, an hour before it was to be closed for the day. Luckily, the staff there managed to provide my flat mate with a temporary passport – within

that hour! Relieved with the thought that we could accomplish at least one task in an otherwise hectic day at an unknown city, we kept looking for cheap places to stay; I was, after all, the “bank account” for this impromptu Paris trip. We finally found a place near the Gare du Nord, which is among the six large mainline railway stations in Paris. Unbeknownst to me, I would be living in a mini Bangladesh for the next few days.

Imagine seeing Bangladeshi people and hearing Bangla conversations on the streets and in the restaurants, spotting Bangladeshi fruit vendors in the metro stations, discovering *Mughlai porota*, *peyajju*, *tilapia maach*, *shoil maach*, *gorur mangsho bhuna*, *chhola*, *doi* and other Bangladeshi dishes in the heart of Paris. Here, I even spotted some saree shops. What attracted me the most was the fact that the shops had Bangladeshi names such as “Café Bangla” and “Café Sundarban”, unlike in the UK where most Bangladeshi-run restaurants brand themselves as Indian restaurants and tweak the flavours accordingly. After a long time, I actually found authentic Bangladeshi flavours, that too in Paris.

The next few days were spent exploring the city using trains, taxis, metros and tuk-tuks, as tourists do. Meanwhile, we also

had to be done with some paperwork, as my friend needed a temporary biometric residence permit to return to the UK and avoid being deported to Sri Lanka. We got a phone for her from a Bangladeshi shop at a discounted rate as I requested the *mama* to lower the price. We obtained more discounts from other Bangladeshi stores where the *mamas* helped with topping up her phone and providing good quality appliances. These details may sound trivial, however, when you are away for a long time and come across places that feel like home, and on top of that, when your own people help you out, you really feel a sense of pride and admiration for your country.

Even then, I wonder how much we know about the Bangladeshis who are staying in France, seeking asylum, mostly since 2008. Where is the research on their living conditions, how have they made a living for themselves in foreign land, and what challenges do they face in their lives?

At the end of the day, the unexpected Paris trip turned out to be a beautiful experience for me. From finding Bangladesh to watching the sunset at the Eiffel Tower, from having *bhata* and *murgir jhol* to supporting my flat mate through a difficult time, the week in Paris was “surprenante!”

WOMEN WHO TRAVEL

Doubts, risks, and the joy in exploration

TASNIM ODRIKA

A month ago, three of my female friends planned a trip to Cox's Bazar. They decided to take a late night bus. It was a simple enough plan which should have been easily executable by any adult but I ended up not going because there was no way I could explain to my parents that I would be traveling, at night on a bus, to Cox's Bazar with three other girls even though I am a university graduate with a full-time job.

The above situation is not uncommon for any woman with wanderlust living in Bangladesh. Many have had to bury their urge to travel into the unknown while others, who have the privilege of being able to go abroad, have done that as an alternative. And this is another common theme I've come across while writing this article. Most parents who have been protective of girls wanting to travel within Bangladesh have easily allowed them to do so outside of the country.

Nevertheless, I have always wondered what it would be like to be out on your own in nature or exploring a completely new place alone.

Afra Nawar, an engineer working for a Bangladeshi mobile financial service provider, shared her experience of traveling alone within the country for the first time.

“I have travelled extensively abroad as a solo traveller but ever since Covid-19 hit and the international borders became off-limit, I started travelling within the country as an alternative,” says Afra. Her journey initially began after she met some trekkers through social media groups who enjoy going off-trail inside Bandarban.

“My first trip was to Nafakhum and Amiakhum in Bandarban. The whole trail consists of various mountainous lakes and you climb mountains and boulders to reach a beautiful waterfall. It requires 7 to 8 hours of trekking to reach Amiakhum. When the first trip turned out okay, it put me at ease and prepared me for my next ones and I ended up going to three more trekking trips inside Bandarban and even camped on top of Marayan Tong on a freezing December night, which was again, a

whole different experience for me,” she explains.

Now, a lot of the time, people ask, “What is the need for traveling alone for women?” You could just travel with your family, right?

In reply, Iqra L. Qamari, a junior consultant working for Public Private Partnership Authority Bangladesh, explains, “When you travel with your family, more often than not, you're under some form of supervision. It's liberating for me to travel alone or with my friends where I can be myself.”

She went on to share an experience. The place she talks about is the waterfall called Hum Hum also known by the locals as Cheetah Falls, situated in the Rajkandi reserve forest in Kamalganj, Moulvibazar District.

“The waterfall is a five-hour trek away and hence you are ideally supposed to start at dawn. But we started the trek at 2 PM. Of the two paths to the waterfall, we took the scenic one with small waterfalls along the way. On our way, the waterfalls created slides and huge puddles where we sat pretending to be in Jacuzzi. It was beautiful. By the time we reached the waterfall, it was dusk. Now, in this situation, if we were with our parents, there would be outbursts and they would have freaked out. But, my friends and I were laid back and we were enjoying the journey. As it got dark, we lost our way back but we were still enjoying the adventure of it. We thought it was a very rare experience,” recalled Iqra.

She further added, “We understand very well that it was a risky situation to be in but it was a very memorable experience. When we found our way back, we came out of the forest with torn sandals, fire-ant bites, and leeches stuck to our body.”

However, this is not to glorify traveling inside Bangladesh for women, as adventures are not devoid of risks and safety concerns.

“On our night journey to St. Martin's island, my friend and I were the only female passengers on the bus. Right after getting on the bus, both of us became quite stressed. We were two girls travelling alone at

night. We could feel other passengers judging us and talking about us which was quite unpleasant,” said Anupoma Joyeeta Joyee, a barrister and advocate, while talking about her first-time experience of traveling alone with a female friend inside Bangladesh.

“At one point, when we were at a stoppage, after finishing our dinner and getting on the bus, one of the male passengers had his phone angled towards us. It was clear that he was taking our pictures. When I confronted the person, he denied it and said that he was actually talking on the phone. He retaliated to my accusation with a raised voice and most passengers took the man's side. I realised that the more I argued, the more I would increase people's hostility towards me and so after a while I had to step down,” she recounted.

Regardless, this experience did not dampen the trip for either of them and after reaching the resort at their destination, the duo was beyond ecstatic.

“I understand everyone will have different degrees of trouble while traveling in Bangladesh especially if they are a solo traveller. When we were at St. Martin's the first day, we were so content and satisfied with ourselves for having done that. It was an experience of a lifetime in the sense that we were always told travelling alone as a female in Bangladesh isn't possible, but we did that. It made me feel empowered,” commented Joyee.

Now, looking back at my broken Cox's Bazar plan, a part of me wishes I had taken that leap, while another part of me is fully aware of the security concerns that perturb not just my parents but myself as well. The unfairness of the situation where I have to take so many things into account in order to embark on an adventure here is clear to me and all we can hope for is sometime in the near future, all of us can hop on buses and trains to discover the world irrespective of our gender.

Tasnim Odrika has only one personality trait and that is cats. Share ideas for new personality traits with her at odrika_02@yahoo.com



ask the server at a restaurant for help. She connected us to the emergency police hotline and suggested that we visit the nearby police station. During the ride to the police station, my flat mate tried to convince me to catch the onward flight to our planned destination. She almost had me convinced but, thankfully, I realized I could not just leave my friend stranded in foreign land. I decided to stay with her, whatever came by.

We registered a complaint with all the details we could manage and the police

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