



The Madhabkunda waterfall in Moulvibazar is seen teeming with tourists just days after Eid-ul-Fitr celebrations as a long holiday amid relaxed Covid-19 restrictions has prompted people to start travelling once again. The photo was taken on Thursday.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

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The name “Sreemangal” makes the heart tremble, according to a man who came to visit the ever-popular tourist destination to enjoy the Eid holiday with his family.

Following two years of stagnation due to the coronavirus pandemic, the tourism industry in Moulvibazar is enjoying good business as last as vacation spots across the region are seeing an influx of travellers thanks to the lifting of restrictions on public movement.

“Almost all the affordable rooms at resorts and luxury hotels in the district have been booked since May 4,” said Kazi Shamsul Haque, general secretary of the Sreemangal Parjatan Seba Sangstha, a collective of local businesses related to the tourism industry.

“As such, it can be estimated that there are currently more than 4,000 tourists in the district,” added Haque, also owner of the Nishorgo Eco Resort.

Selim Ahmed, president of the Sreemangal Parjatan Seba Sangstha and owner of the Grand Selim Hotel, said some 50,000 to 70,000 tourists could visit Moulvibazar during this Eid-ul-Fitr season.

“As a result, the local tourism industry might be able to do business worth about Tk 25 crore to Tk 30 crore at this time,” he added.

Shahin Ahmed, a ticket collector of Lawachara National Park, told this correspondent that not many visitors had arrived in the past two Eid seasons as the Covid-19 crisis had put a damper on celebrations.



“This year though, we earned more than Tk 2.5 lakh in the first two days after Eid from ticket sales alone. So, we hope more tourists will continue to come,” he said.

Backward linkage industries are enjoying similar benefits as the huge presence of visitors is keeping them all busy.

“We used to solely work on producing betel leaf but are now benefiting from increased tourism as we have become involved in various professions related to the industry,” said Saju Marchiang, publication and information secretary of the Khasi Social Council, a platform for members of the Khasi community in Kamalganj upazila.

Saiful Islam, manager of Fahim Enterprise, said the local tea leaf business was not in a very good state for the past two years due to Covid-19.

But since tourists have finally

returned this year, thousands of people are director or indirectly benefitting from about 200 tea shops spread across the region, he added.

Mir Nahid Ahsan, deputy commissioner of Moulvibazar, said about one tenth of the people currently travelling in the country have come to the district.

Ahsan informed that the local authorities had held meetings to discuss safety measures for tourists prior to the Eid celebrations.

However, the authorities were prompted to hold another meeting in the wake of an incident on May 5, when volunteers of the upazila administration assaulted tourists at the ticket counter of the Jallong tourist centre.

“We are working to strengthen security now so that all tourists can travel at peace. As such, additional police have been deployed along with

the tourist police in Sreemangal, Kamalganj and Madhabkunda since that day,” he said.

Ahsan went on to say that they initiated a local tourist bus service to facilitate travel between various spots in Moulvibazar.

“Many of them cannot see everything in time due to transport issues and so, they could make use of this opportunity now,” he added.

Mohammad Shahin Mia, a tourist from Rajshahi, said he came to the district with a view to enjoying a vacation at a very low cost.

“I thought it would cost a lot because after everything has become pricey in the wake of Covid-19. That’s why I thought I’d go home but instead, I got on a Moulvibazar tourist bus,” Mia said.

“It made our tour so much easier and budget-friendly. We could also visit all of our desired tourist spots with much less hassle and in just one day,” he added.

Officials of the Sreemangal Parjatan Seba Sangstha say the number of visiting tourists has never been so high.

During a recent visit to the area, this correspondent found that travellers were braving the extreme heat to spend time with their loved ones at various destinations.

People like Subha Begum, who live in large metropolitan areas like Dhaka, said they came to enjoy a break from city life during the Eid holiday.

Poppy Begum and her husband Mumin Mia said there are a number of new places to visit for young couples too.

“The tea gardens along with the lights reflecting on water surfaces all together give you a sense of romance,” she said.

Oman Air plans daily flights from Dhaka

SHIMUL NAZRUL and FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN, City

Oman Air plans to start running daily flights from Dhaka to serve the growing number of passengers from the country as the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) in the capital is set to make its new terminal operational, said Sunil V A, regional vice-president of the airline.

Currently, the national airline of the Middle Eastern country runs three flights a week from the HSIA, the largest airport in Bangladesh.

“We want to fly daily from Dhaka,” said Sunil in an interview with The Daily Star on the sidelines of an event in Chattogram recently.



At present, the airline operates seven flights a week from the Shah Amanat International Airport located in the port city of Chattogram.

Sunil said the runway of a new terminal at the HSIA is under construction.

“We are hoping that the airport will fully open up by June and we will get slots and operate daily flights from there.”

The company’s major target is Oman-Muscat bound passengers. There are already a lot of people from the Chattogram region living and working in the Middle Eastern country.

It caters around 70 per cent of passengers from Chattogram bound for Oman while it is 40 per cent from Dhaka and other parts of the country.

For the flights from Chattogram, the company is going to shift from narrow-body planes to wide-body aircraft, depending on demand. Currently, it runs flights with Boeing 737 narrow-body aircraft.

“We also operated Dreamliner in the past when demand picked up,” Sunil said, referring to Boeing’s wide-body jet airliner.

Currently, Oman Air runs three flights a week from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka

He pointed out that the overall business is getting bigger in Bangladesh.

There are lots of developments going on in the country. New terminals are coming up. A number of key infrastructure projects in Dhaka and Chattogram would be ready by 2023.

“I am happy to see the metro rail in Dhaka. I heard that a few more hotels are coming up in the airport area in Chattogram, so all of them will really help.”

Sunil sees a huge business opportunity in the fast-growing country.

“Lots of foreigners and workers are coming to the port city and lots of expatriates will come to live here.”

Oman Air looks to diversify in Bangladesh as it is a growing market.

“We have a very strong network in Europe and the Middle East. Our vision is to grow with the city of Chattogram,” said the senior official.

Sunil admitted that the airline industry went through tough times in the last two years because of the coronavirus pandemic as international travels were mostly suspended during the period.

“When the pandemic hit, we had certain issues with our aircraft because lots of people were travelling from Oman to Chattogram and we were not able to manage aircraft at that time properly.”

“Because of lockdowns and no flights, we had 85 per cent of our flights suspended. It was really a tough time as we had to keep paying the bills and salaries.”

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Fed makes biggest rate hike since 2000

AFP, Washington

The Federal Reserve announced its biggest rate hike since 2000, with a half percentage point increase as it works to crush soaring US inflation.

With inflation at the highest rate in four decades, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell sent a message directly to the American people, expressing concern for the pain caused by rising prices, and pledging to use all available tools to bring them down.

But he told reporters he remains confident the economy is strong enough to withstand rate increases without tipping into a recession.

After a quarter-point hike in March, the US central bank’s policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) pushed the benchmark interest rate above 0.75 per cent as it works to cool the economy, and confirmed more increases “will be appropriate.”

The hike will raise the costs of all types of borrowing, from mortgages to credit cards to car loans, cooling demand and business activity.

Inflation has become an overriding concern after the world’s largest economy saw annual consumer prices surge 8.5 per cent over the 12 months to March -- the biggest jump since December 1981.

Policymakers continue to believe inflation will gradually return to the Fed’s two-per cent target as it raises borrowing costs, but in a statement following the conclusion of its two-day meeting, the FOMC said it will be “highly attentive to inflation risks.”

In an unusual move, Powell opened his news conference speaking to the American people.

“Inflation is much too high. And we understand the hardship that is causing,” he said, promising to use all tools available to bring it down “expeditiously.”

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Construction workers pass planks of wood to their colleagues above during the construction of new apartments in Monterey Park, California. Inflation in the US has become an overriding concern after the world’s largest economy saw annual consumer prices surge 8.5 per cent over the 12 months to March -- the biggest jump since December 1981.

PHOTO: AFP/FILE

New pipeline links Baltics to European gas network

AFP, Jauniunai

Poland and the Baltic states Thursday inaugurated a new gas pipeline that links the north-eastern EU with the rest of the bloc, a crucial step towards reducing dependence on Russian gas.

The 508 kilometre-long (316-mile) pipeline linking Poland and Lithuania’s gas networks will eventually be able to transport around two billion cubic meters of gas per year in either direction.

Thanks to existing links in the region, Latvia, Estonia and even Finland will also have access to the wider European gas pipeline network.

The European Union’s executive unveiled Wednesday plans for a gradual ban on Russian oil imports as part of a raft of new sanctions to punish Moscow for invading Ukraine.

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