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PHOTO: TITU DAS



Fishermen unload wicker baskets full of hilsa at the river ghat in Barishal. The wholesale market in the city's Port Road buzzes with activities during hilsa season.

Barishal, a serene escape amid nature's bounty

“Now with Padma Bridge, it has become possible to go on day trips to Barishal. I started at 6:00am and reached Barishal by 10:00am. I booked a room at a local hotel and allowed my driver to rest, while I hired their colourful tempo and went sightseeing.”

RAFFAT BINTE RASHID

Surrounded by tall coconut and betel nut trees, picturesque ponds, and lagoons – the green countryside makes Barishal a great city for local tourism. This mid-southern part of Bangladesh, with an amazing diversity in aqua-nature, is an unpolluted, tidy city that is lush all over.

As soon as you turn left, past the Dhaka Bhangra Expressway, you fall on the Bhangra-Barishal-Patuakhali highway and you are welcomed by a canopy of old trees lined on both sides of the road leading to the city. Traffic on these roads is not much, so the noise and air pollution in cities like Barishal, and Faridpur are at a minimum level; at least for Dhakaites, that is.

Not only the highway, even roads, lanes, and thoroughfares inside the city are lined with old rain trees or “rendi” as the locals call it. Amazingly, each tree is covered in a lush growth of epiphytic plants like wild ferns, orchids, hoyas, and moss, hugging the trunk with their green leaves and flowers cascading and dangling down, co-existing most harmoniously, lending a dreamy feel to the whole ambiance of this laid-back city.

Barishal is truly beautiful. “Now with Padma Bridge, it has become possible to go on day trips to Barishal. I started at 6:00am and reached Barishal by 10:00am. I booked a room at a local hotel and allowed my driver to rest, while I hired their colourful tempo and went sightseeing,” says Rosie Ahmed, who was a resident of the city during her childhood.

“I went looking for my old house, my first school, and the Guthia mosque, an amazing architectural feat surrounded by manicured gardens, guarded by a big flock of swans. The Baitul Aman Jame Masjid Complex commonly known as Guthia Mosque, is inspired by Islamic architecture, the mosque complex stands on 14 acres of land, with 20 domes, and there are three lakes surrounding the mosque in a manner that reflects the whole mosque from different angles.

“Several calligraphies of Ayatul Kursi and Surah Ar-Rahman are inscribed around the mosque walls. It envelops you in a spiritual calmness, as you sit in the corridors,” Ahmed, 76, says.

“We feasted on a lavish lunch

attraction of these rides is the floating guava and lemon market. There is also a boat market,” he added.

The moist mud along the canals is perfect for the local variety of guava, hog plum, and lemon. The fruit orchards extend a minimum of two miles around the canal system and the trees almost bend down on the side and you can reach out for the fruits from your boat.

The biodiversity of the backwater of Barishal is an astounding, complex clockwork of nature. A man surrounded by thick green vegetation and an aquatic ecosystem makes for an interdependent living. Each household has basket fishing traps, which are dipped into the river with its open end, when it is lifted, the water drains off and the catches are picked.

This makes for a scrumptious lunch with taro and other greens that grow in abundance on their homestead.

this city can be joyful.

THE MUCH FREQUENTED PLACES Barishal has its healthy share of rich history, being one of the oldest municipalities and river ports of Bengal. It was said that the economy of Bengal was dependent on the economy of Barishal because its fertile land, consisting of silt, was excellent for agriculture and was thus considered the granary of Bengal.

As history and folklore point out, the city, located on the north bank of the Bay of Bengal in southern Bangladesh and surrounded by many rivers, was once called the Venice of the East.

Famous tourist attractions include the Durga Sagar – a sanctuary for birds, and a haven for fishing – a vast lake with a total area of about 25 hectares (62 acres).

Bibir Pukur, right in the middle of a busy thoroughfare, is another well-known historical place. The pond



PHOTO: TITU DAS

Bibir Pukur, right in the middle of a busy thoroughfare, is a well-known historical place in Barishal city.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Not only the highway, even roads, lanes, and thoroughfares inside the city are lined with tall trees.



The Baitul Aman Jame Masjid Complex, commonly known as Guthia Mosque.

PHOTO: STAR



Moving through the backwaters of Barishal, one surrenders to nature, the heavy silence in these deep areas is only interrupted when the boat's oar slowly moves the water or when a bird chirps.

PHOTO: COLLECTED



Durga Sagar, a vast lake with a total area of about 25 hectares (62 acres).

PHOTO: TITU DAS

of hilsa in mustard paste, and thick lentil curry and headed towards the hilsa ‘arodh’ [wholesale market]. Our reason for this day trip was to bag the big Padma hilsas. Then, we started our return to Dhaka around 4:00pm and reached the capital by 10:00pm. It was an amazing adventure,” Ahmed relays the details of their trip.

If you plan to spend a weekend in Barishal, The Grand Park Hotel ensures a five-star stay with well-designed suites, a lavish breakfast spread, swimming pool with steam and sauna facilities. Their hospitality will want you to go back again.

“The main touristy appeal is the backwaters of Barishal, an incredible labyrinthine system of intersected canals, which makes for an amazing, once-in-a-lifetime experience. You can take a dinghy boat and row your way through narrow canals, which are just wide enough for the boat to maneuver. For the wider canals, you can hire motorised trawlers,” says Zahidul Haque Babul, who has his roots in Barishal but lives in Dhaka for his businesses.

“This is a great source of entertainment for the young residents and tourists, they play the latest Bangla and Hindi hits, blasting through the big loudspeakers. They just dive and frolic in the canals to cool off, their happiness is contagious. The main

The bamboo fences or machas are full of hanging seasonal vegetables like kakrol or teasel gourd and other leafy greens; dead betel nut tree trunks make their shako or makeshift bridge placed across the narrow canals to go from one house to another.

“Living in this remote place is stress-free, locals make do with whatever nature provides. In these rural households, life is as organic as it can be.

Moving through the backwaters of Barishal, you surrender to nature, the heavy silence in these deep areas is only interrupted when the boat's oar slowly moves the water or when a bird chirps. The silence is so intense that it gets to you at one point,” quips Chompa Hossain, a student who resides on the banks of a canal. She was perched up on a pier, selling green coconuts from her smallholding.

From hand-churned butter to roshgollas, from hilsa wholesale markets to Arabian restaurants like Huma Hum [which means feasting together] serving the best Arabian rice dish called khabsa, a weekend in

is named after Jinath Bibi, who had the pond dug in 1908 to give relief to the locals from the suffering of water shortage.

Zilla school, the vertically huge structure of Barisal Medical College, and the famous Govt Brojomohun College, commonly known as BM College, founded in 1889, is one of the oldest institutions of higher education in Bangladesh. All these places have their foundation grounded in history from the colonial era.

Bell's Park is another example of Barishal's British Bengal connection. Situated at the heart of Barishal is the Bangabandhu Udyan, popularly known as Bell's Park. This historic urban park adjacent to a riverside road has a playground, a walkway, and a helipad, all encircled by old trees. The park was constructed in 1896 by ND Beatson Bell to celebrate the visit of Sir Alexander Mackenzie, lieutenant-governor of Bengal.

Another historical place turned into a happening leisure destination is the “Turkish Godown” by the river



Kirtankhola. History says there were 30 go-downs to store rice, which were dispatched and distributed from there to other districts. The al-fresco-styled food court and small two-storied hut-like restaurants offer a variety of snacks as diverse as jhalmuri and syrupy waffles to phuchka, chotpoti, and bite-sized Bombay shingaras.

“Craft shops line the river banks along the Bhangra Bazar by Kirtankhola. They also offer rental trawler rides on the Kirtankhola, a river that is 160 kilometres,” says Chompa, while talking enthusiastically about why Barishal can be your next tourist destination.

You soak in the serenity of the flowing river view and be mesmerised like Jibanananda Das with beautiful Barishal – serene with wide roads, glistening ponds at intervals, dotted by tall coconut trees, the big neon sign of “I love Barishal” at the city centre by the Planet Park compliments the cityscape.

Barishal is Bangladesh's third largest financial hub after Dhaka and Chattogram. The south of Bangladesh is lush and unaltered away from the tide of urbanisation. It's the perfect local tourism destination to unwind.

Barishal is truly “God's own country”.