



JAFLONG KHASIA PUNJI

Touring more like a local, less like a tourist

Stay briefly with the ethnic people, explore their culture, music, and cuisine, and support community-led tourism and livelihoods

In recent years, community-based tourism (CBT) has gained global recognition as a sustainable alternative to mass travel. In traditional tourism, a large share of profit often leaves local hands. But CBT keeps visitors within indigenous communities. Guests stay in homestays, experience the culture directly and buy local goods

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

TANGILA TASnim

The fastest way to sense the pulse of a place is to meet its people. Arrange a stay in their home, and you might leave with a friendship that lasts a lifetime. This is the kind of experience unfolding inside the clustered households of the Khasia punji at Jaflong in Sylhet.

Travellers already know Jaflong for its flowing river, vast stone beds and the grand view of the Meghalaya hills. Many drive to the northeastern city of Sylhet, head further north to Jaflong, visit the scenic Khasia settlement near the Bangladesh-India border, then return to the town for the night.

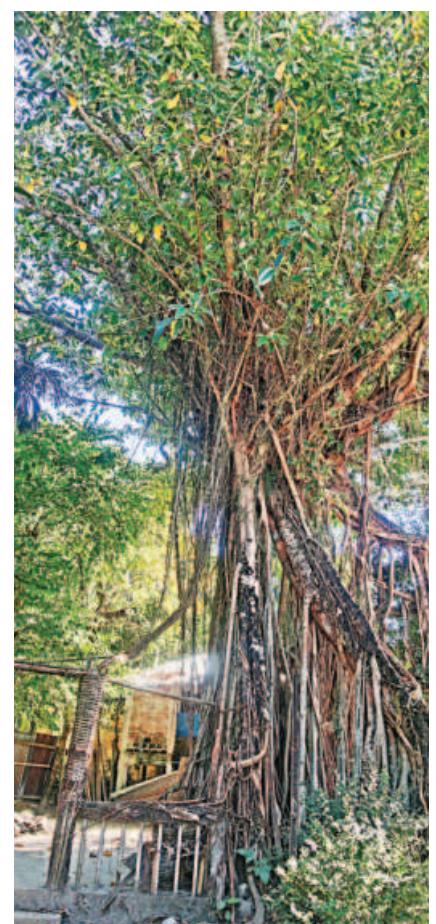
Nowadays, a different welcome awaits. On the banks of the Piyain river, the punji, meaning village, has opened its door to visitors early this year.

Guests now can enjoy the quiet of the hills, listen to Khasia music in the evening, taste home cooking, stay overnight and immerse themselves in the life of the community more like a local than a passing tourist.

The experience begins almost immediately upon arrival.

By the riverside, a group of Khasia hosts may already be waiting. From here, the trek starts. The path winds through patches of forest where sunlight slips in thin, soft beams.

The punji soon appears, a cluster of houses raised on stilts. A member of



there is cycling. Boating caters to those who prefer calm. Evening brings cultural performances, where songs rise into the night and linger long after they fade.

A NEW KIND OF TRAVEL

In recent years, community-based tourism (CBT) has gained global recognition as a sustainable alternative to mass travel.

In traditional tourism, a large share of profit often leaves local hands. But CBT keeps visitors within indigenous communities. Guests stay in homestays, experience the culture directly and buy local goods.

The result is fairer income for marginalised groups and protection of their identity. Success here is measured not only by numbers but by fairness, community voice, youth opportunity and the safeguarding of biodiversity.

Inside the punji, the homestay experience opens a window into a world many Bangladeshis know only from schoolbooks. Guests receive a traditional welcome, learn about Khasia customs and stay in rooms priced between Tk 1,500 and Tk 2,500 a night.

Life in the punji offers a rare look at matrilineal Khasia society, where women play central roles in household leadership, in governance and as guardians of property and lineage. Visitors share meals -- both Begali and local dishes -- with host families, join evening bonfires and listen to stories that carry generations of memory.

The Destination Management Committee (DMC), made up of local representatives, organises cultural performances that showcase authentic Khasia music, dance and storytelling. Apart from homestays, tourists explore the Khasia Museum, attend weaving workshops and visit historic sites including the palace of the Jaintia King and Nokslar Jamindar Palace.

Nature lovers find waterfalls such as the scenic Mayabi Waterfall, quiet tea gardens and the clear waters of the Dawki River. Activities include boating and fishing on the Piyain river, guided treks through Mokampunji, cycling routes, orchard walks, betel leaf gardens and forest trails that mix adventure with culture.

A MEMORABLE VISIT

For visitor Jannatul Maowa, who travelled the punji and took a homestay,

the memory was transformative.

"Since it was my first time staying in a homestay, the experience felt truly mesmerising," she said. "Sharing a roof and having meals with people I had only read about in my childhood Bangladesh studies book felt almost surreal."

"What impressed me most was their warm and friendly hospitality, as well as the innocence and sincerity of the tour guides who stayed with us throughout the trip," said Jannatul.

"And of course, the scenic beauty of the selfie zone, a bamboo platform where visitors can sit with the majestic Meghalaya mountains standing like a silent guard behind, made the experience even more unforgettable," she added.

Every visitor who arrives strengthens this growing network. Homestay owners, guides, artisans, transport workers, cooks and young entrepreneurs all earn a share.

Although the community began hosting visitors only in April and financial records are still being gathered, early benefits are already visible.

The DMC ensures that tourism remains safe, beneficial to locals and genuine. It oversees homestay standards, guest reception, cultural events, sanitation, waste management and fair revenue sharing.

By creating jobs for youth and women in guiding, hospitality, food services, cycling, boat hire and crafts, the committee keeps tourism income within the punji, lifting living standards and strengthening the local economy.

A COMMUNITY STEPS FORWARD

Welcome Lyumba, headman of the punji and secretary of the DMC, recalled a long path to change.

"Jaflong has seen tourists for decades, yet our community never benefited because we had no knowledge, training, or infrastructure for tourism. After 65 meetings, we realised that community-based tourism could protect our culture while improving livelihoods."

With help from the Tourism Board

and development partners, families are preparing homestays, upgrading basic facilities and learning hospitality skills. Challenges remain, including financial limits, guest security and proper washrooms, but the momentum is clear.

"With continued support," he said, "we hope to build a sustainable, community-led future for our punji."

The ProGRESS Project, a joint initiative of the government and the International Labour Organization (ILO) funded by Canada, supports this initiative. It strengthens the local economy, preserves indigenous culture, creates opportunities for youth and women and encourages entrepreneurship.

Through training, stronger institutions and better coordination, ProGRESS aims to turn Khasia punji into a sustainable tourism destination.

Twelve guides have been trained so far, with more support underway.

Alexius Chicham, senior programme officer at ILO Bangladesh, said, "From our observation that tourists often visit but locals do not benefit, we planned to promote community-based tourism in Khasia punji and train locals as tour guides. If fully implemented, this can help the tourism industry generate real economic gains."

One of the newly trained guides is Seveny Khongstei, who welcomes visitors.

"When tourists arrive, our job begins right at the riverbank. We receive them, welcome them, and guide them into the community," he said.

The punji receives both homestay guests and day visitors. Homestay guests are welcomed with paan supari garlands and a drink before exploring the museum, nature trails, Lama punji, cycling routes and cultural shows. Day visitors enjoy a shorter version of the experience.

Seveny said international interest is rising from France, Italy, the United States and beyond, with many surprised to see community-led tourism thriving in such a remote area. The guide team

includes seven women and five men, mostly students or recent graduates.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH, WOMEN

Before CBT, many in the ethnic community were unemployed or had left school. Seveny himself, an accounting graduate from Sylhet Government College, acknowledged the change.

"None of us knew guiding could be a profession. Now we earn a small but steady income, which supports our families. Tourism has given us confidence, new communication skills, and a different understanding of our own culture."

As homestay tourism expands, Jaflong's infrastructure has improved to some extent as well. Roads, sanitation and waste management are becoming better.

Older Khasia residents often reflect that visitors once came and went while their lives stayed unchanged. Today, that is beginning to change.

CBT advances several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by reducing poverty, empowering women, creating jobs, supporting small enterprises and encouraging eco-friendly practices. It aligns with Bangladesh's ambition for sustainable growth, linking tourism with rural development and cultural preservation.

Similar CBT efforts are emerging in Kamalganj in Moulvibazar, Kalinchon in Shyamnagar and Kagajikhola in Bandarban with assistance from the Bangladesh Tourism Board and UNDP Bangladesh.

Kabil Mian, deputy director of the Bangladesh Tourism Board, believes CBT can deepen inclusion. "Community-based tourism can help bring marginalised groups like the Khasia into the mainstream economy. Our goal is to encourage tourists to visit the Khasia punji, learn about their culture, and ensure the community benefits financially."

According to the official, many people fear entering ethnic settlements, and the communities themselves feel unsure about hosting outsiders.

"The Tourism Board is acting as a bridge, training local guides, improving facilities and supporting homestays, so both visitors and residents gain confidence, and the area can develop into a sustainable tourism site," he added.



the host family greets you with paan-supari and a garland.

The village is tidy, unlike many rural scenes elsewhere. One storey homes here are above the ground to keep out dampness and insects.

Climb the stairs to your room. It is simple: a bed, a table, a light, a fan, an attached washroom and, to your surprise, a functioning Wi-Fi. Feels like almost nothing unnecessary, yet nothing is missing.

Leave your bags and take a moment. A Khasia guide, often a young resident of the punji, is usually waiting outside. The first stop is the Khasia Museum, followed by other attractions.

For those who want a quicker pace,