



(From left) A tombstone at the christian cemetery; a monument at the entrance of Our lady of the Holy Rosary Cathedral; and a monument at the Chattogram War Cemetery honouring the fallen soldiers of World War II.

## Three cemeteries that tell Chattogram's LAYERED PAST



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Travelling to cemeteries is neither common nor particularly popular in our part of the world. Even heritage tourism itself was barely acknowledged as a serious form of travel a decade ago. While things have changed slightly, heritage travel still occupies a modest corner of travellers' imaginations today. Yet, slowly and steadily, it is finding its place among history enthusiasts and curious wanderers.

Cemetery travel, in particular, invites raised eyebrows. And yet, a little reflection reveals that some of the world's most visited landmarks are, at heart, burial sites: the pyramids of Egypt, the Taj Mahal, Timur's tomb, mausoleums of rulers, leaders, and historical figures whose resting places have become gateways into the past.

Chattogram -- the Queen of the East -- is an ancient settlement overflowing with archaeological wealth. Historians continue to debate exactly how old this port city is, but they agree on one thing: Chattogram and its international port are at least two thousand years old.

Each name marks a turn in history, a change of rulers, traders, settlers, and travellers who arrived from distant lands and often stayed for

This is among the oldest cemeteries in Bangladesh -- hardly surprising in one of the world's most ancient port cities. Merchants, sailors, administrators, and travellers from Europe and beyond passed through Chattogram for centuries.

What immediately caught my eye were the obelisk-shaped tombs. My first encounter with an obelisk was at Bahadur Shah Park in Dhaka. Until recently, that Dhaka monument was widely considered Bangladesh's only obelisk. But this cemetery adds a new layer to that narrative.

Several obelisk-like tombs stand here, including one with a sharp pyramidal top still intact. The Christian cemetery in Narinda, Dhaka, has similar structures, though none as tall. By that measure, Chattogram can rightfully claim to host Bangladesh's second obelisk.

Among all the cemeteries I have visited across the country, this is the richest in surviving graves -- around 300 in total. Yet many epitaphs are weathered beyond reading, pleading for restoration.

The oldest surviving grave belongs to 17-year-old Hannah Ross, wife of James Ross, who died



A memorial register listing 6,500 merchant navy sailors who perished during the WWII at Chattogram War Cemetery.

laws -- a cemetery so vast it cannot be explored on foot. Chattogram's war cemetery is smaller, but no less moving.

World War II reshaped the globe. At the time, Bangladesh was under British rule. To honour fallen soldiers, two war cemeteries were built here -- one in Chattogram and the other in Cumilla's Mainamati. Both are maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Located on Badsha Mia Chowdhury Road in Mehediabag, near the Chattogram Institute of Fine Arts, the cemetery sits on a sloping hillside.

Here lie 755 soldiers who died in the Burma Front -- from Britain, British India, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Myanmar, East and West Africa, the Netherlands, and Japan.

Upon entering, a central altar marked with a cross and sword motif draws the eye. Two red-brick cottages flank the gate. One houses

a memorial book listing 6,500 merchant navy sailors who perished during the war. The other contains a register detailing the names and brief biographies of the 755 soldiers buried here.

What makes this cemetery exceptional is that soldiers here are buried according to their religious traditions.

Construction began in the early 1950s. Initially, there were 400 graves. Notably, alongside Commonwealth forces lie 19 Japanese soldiers, commemorated by a slightly elevated memorial -- a rare symbol of reconciliation.

During the war, Chattogram hosted Allied training facilities, the Fourteenth Army's forward base, and British General Hospital No. 152, active from December 1944 to October 1945. After the war, remains from temporary graves across the region were shifted here.

Standing amid the perfectly tended lawns, I could not help wishing the Christian cemetery received even a fraction of this care.

### OUR LADY OF THE HOLY ROSARY CATHEDRAL AND CEMETERY

British writer John A Radford notes in Chittagong Christian Cemetery that Roman Catholic priest Father Francisco Fernandez arrived in Porto Grande (Chattogram) from Goa in 1598. However, the Portuguese presence in the area dates back to 1518.

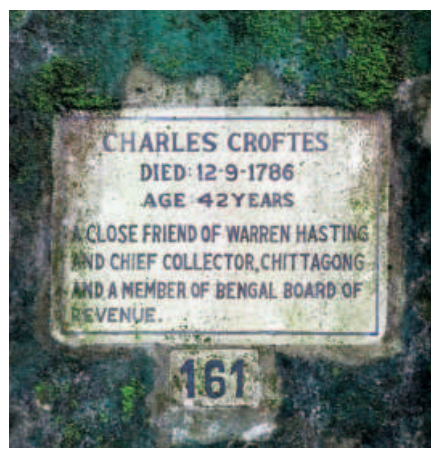
The first Christian church in Chattogram was established around 1600 AD. Though initially welcomed by the Arakan kings, it was later destroyed, and priests were imprisoned. A second church, built in 1602, was lost to natural disasters.

The Our Lady of the Holy Rosary Cathedral, located on Bandar Road, Patharghata and established in 1843, is among the oldest churches in Bangladesh, locally known as the Patharghata Church.

It was built on one acre of land by Francis Auguste Gairaud and Jean Barbier and dedicated to Lady Rosary. The last renovation of the church, which can accommodate 500 worshippers, was carried out in 1933. Inside, murals and oil paintings of Jesus adorn the walls.

East of the church stands a memorial to Father Francisco Fernandez SJ. Born in Toledo, Spain, in 1550, he died under torture on November 14, 1602, after attempting to rescue enslaved children from Arakan.

Roaming the cathedral was a bonus -- the atmosphere there was serene, luminous, and immaculately kept.



generations. Many lived here, raised families here, and eventually died here. Their graves scattered across the city form silent archives, each tombstone a page of history, many unread, many forgotten.

Much of Chattogram's tangible heritage has vanished. What once stood proudly now survives only in books and fading memories. What little remains is under constant threat from neglect and relentless urbanisation. To me, mysterious and magnetic Chattogram is a paradise waiting to be rediscovered through heritage tourism.

And among its most evocative sites are its cemeteries.

### THE CHRISTIAN CEMETERY

One of my favourite places in Chattogram is the Christian Cemetery, established in 1700 AD, tucked away in the Sholoshahar area. No heritage tour of the city feels complete without a visit here. I have returned several times, and each visit leaves me quietly spellbound.

The first time I entered, I was struck by an unexpected stillness. Just past the entrance lies a small sitting area. I lingered there in silence, feeling as if the graves might begin whispering stories if I stepped closer. The place felt uncannily alive.

on September 26, 1774.

One striking obelisk marks the grave of Hulda Hinrichs, a German woman who died on March 1, 1892. She lived in Chattogram with her husband, Capi C Hinrichs, whose profession remains unrecorded -- an unusual omission for the time.

Equally compelling is the Mughal-style tomb of Charles Crofts, chief collector of Chattogram, who died in 1786. A close associate of Warren Hastings, Bengal's first governor general, Crofts was also a member of the Bengal Board of Revenue.

Globally, obelisks have long adorned cities and graves -- from Greece, where the concept originated, to Egypt, France, Italy, England, Turkey, and the United States. Seeing them here, weathered yet dignified, connects Chattogram to that broader architectural and cultural lineage.

Sadly, neglect is eroding this place. Overgrown bushes, insects, broken boundary walls, and nearby garbage dumps threaten its dignity. During monsoons, bats and snakes reportedly seek shelter here. These are not inevitable problems -- care and maintenance can easily control them.

This space deserves to be safe, accessible, and respected so that visitors can explore without fear. Its architectural diversity and historical depth make it irreplaceable.

### CHATTOGRAM WAR CEMETERY

Whenever war cemeteries are mentioned, my mind drifts to Manila, where 17,000 soldiers of World War II rest beneath endless green

