



The hidden canyons of SREEMANGAL

Ancient gorges emerging as new eco-tourism draw

MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

Tucked away in the serene hills of Sreemangal, a natural wonder has begun to draw in nature lovers and thrill-seeking tourists. The region's ancient canyons, Nisvarga Girikhat, Ulka Girikhat, and Baykul Girikhat, some of which are thought to be thousands of years old, are emerging as a significant new tourist destination.

Surrounded by lush forests, towering mountains, and gushing waterfalls, the canyons offer a rare chance to experience the untouched beauty of Bangladesh's natural landscape. In recent years, they have gained prominence not only for their awe-inspiring vistas but also for their ecological significance.

The area's dramatic geography and distinctive biodiversity make it a hidden gem, now increasingly explored by adventurers, environmentalists, and those eager to witness unspoiled nature.

The canyons of Sreemangal stand out as some of the most visually striking and mysterious natural formations in the country. The Khasi language has a word, Lasuban, that aptly describes the landscape. It means hilly flower or wild flower, a fitting reference to the abundance of lush greenery and colourful, diverse flora surrounding these gorges.

A gorge is a narrow, steep-sided valley, often with a river or stream running along its base, typically formed by geological erosion.

But these are no ordinary ravines. Their story has been shaped over millennia by the steady, insistent force of water and erosion. Deep, rocky and shadowed, the gorges are as compelling as they are beautiful, carrying environmental value that extends beyond their striking appearance. The natural features of the area, including its diverse plant and animal life, make it an important site for conservation efforts and scientific study.

Philah Pothmi, headman of Lawachhara punjee, said the gorges are very long, so in the Khasi language they were called Krem Kru and Krem Ulka, which means they

look like long trains.

"We were worshippers of nature. Because nature can keep people well. We live with various resources of nature. That is why no one ever thought of destroying nature. That is why these gorges are still the same as they were, without any change." Saju Marchiang, a local, said the gorges are about 25 kilometres from Sreemangal town. They are in the hilly forests of the punjee area, next to the Nahar tea gardens in Sindurkhan Union.

Md Tazul Islam Zaved, Sreemangal's upazila coordinator for Minority

first came across these hidden gems. The moment I saw the gorges, I knew I had stumbled upon something special. The natural beauty was unlike anything I had seen before. Despite the area's profound beauty, it remained largely under the radar due to its remote location and challenging terrain," Zaved recalls.

At the time of his discovery, the canyons were completely inaccessible to outsiders. The hilly roads leading to the area were treacherous, making it nearly impossible for visitors to explore. The surrounding forests

over rocky terrain, and navigate through dense jungles. It was an exhausting, yet exhilarating journey," he says.

Along with a small group of local guides, Zaved traversed the dangerous path and, as he walked deeper into the forest, the sense of awe grew stronger.

"The canyons themselves reveal the true power of nature's sculpting forces. The stone walls of the canyons have been carved over centuries, creating narrow pathways through which the waters flow. The gorges are alive with sound, the rushing of water,

endlessly, and the water running through the bottom appeared almost like a silver ribbon in the dim light.

Despite the beauty, there were dangers. At one point, Zaved and his team had to climb over a slippery forest hill. "The ground was wet from the rain, and vines covered the path. It felt as though the mountain itself was trying to stop us," he recalls.

But the desire to witness the canyon in its full glory kept the team going. "After overcoming the challenges, we reached the base of the gorge, where we were greeted by a stunning sight:

aquatic life, and the surrounding forest is teeming with birds, insects, and plants that thrive in the rich, humid environment.

Because of the canyons' natural beauty and ecological significance, they have become an area of interest for environmentalists and conservationists. The region's untouched wilderness makes it an important site for research, offering valuable insights into biodiversity and the environmental challenges it faces. The forest around the gorges is also home to Khasi communities, who have lived in harmony with the land for centuries.

In recent years, efforts have been made to improve accessibility to these remote gorges as more people discover their beauty. The administration has started constructing roads and bridges that will make it easier for tourists to visit. However, Sreemangal's rugged terrain and the challenges of building infrastructure in a remote, hilly area have made these efforts slow-going.

Former Moulvibazar Deputy Commissioner Israel Hossain said the road construction is underway but cautioned that visitors should not attempt to visit the area without an experienced guide. "It's still a very remote area. Tourists should go with a guide who knows the area well, as the terrain can be dangerous."

The construction of infrastructure will undoubtedly increase tourist traffic, but local officials have emphasised the importance of sustainable development. The area's delicate ecosystem must be protected, and careful planning is needed to ensure the natural beauty of the gorges is not marred by over-tourism, they added.

For those who venture to Sreemangal, the journey is as much about the experience as it is about the destination. The winding mountain roads, the cool, misty mornings, and the allure of the unknown draw travellers in. As one local hilly resident, Edison Tariang said, "These gorges are like another world, a place where nature's power is on full display. It's a place of peace, but also of great adventure."

The canyons of Sreemangal stand out as some of the most visually striking and mysterious natural formations in the country. The Khasi language has a word, Lasuban, that aptly describes the landscape. It means hilly flower or wild flower, a fitting reference to the abundance of lush greenery and colourful, diverse flora surrounding these gorges.

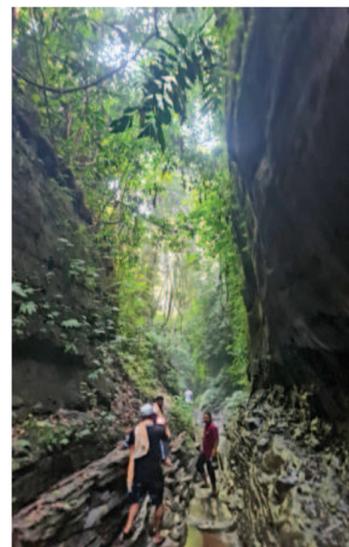


PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

Affairs, is credited with discovering these canyons in 2000 while researching the lifestyle of the region's minority ethnic groups. His interest in the area led him into the remote, deep forests of Sreemangal, where he found the gorges and their surrounding beauty. At the time, the landscape was almost completely unknown to outsiders, and few had ventured into the rugged terrain.

"I was working with the local communities of Sreemangal when I

were thick with foliage, and the risk of encountering dangerous wildlife, including snakes and other creatures, made it a daunting venture.

In 2021, the pandemic led to even stricter travel restrictions, and the canyons became even more isolated. Yet despite these challenges, the area has slowly started to gain attention, largely due to Zaved's initial discovery and his determination to share the beauty of Sreemangal with the world. "We had to cross steep hills, climb

the calls of birds, and the rustling of leaves in the wind. The stark contrast between the deep green foliage and the grey stone walls of the canyons is mesmerising."

For Zaved and his team, the moment of discovery came after crossing a particularly difficult ridge. "When we reached the top and looked down, our eyes widened with astonishment. The gorge below was unlike anything I had ever seen," he adds. The steep, jagged cliffs on either side seemed to stretch

large stones shaped by centuries of water flow, and a dim, almost mystical light that filtered through the dense canopy of trees above."

The canyons of Sreemangal are not just tourist attractions, they are also sites of immense ecological importance. The region is home to a diverse array of flora and fauna, and the gorges provide shelter for many species that are rare or endangered. The clear waters flowing through them sustain small fish and other