

They spoke with a familiarity that only comes from repetition. Cutting, cleaning, drying. Hundreds of fish at different stages of becoming something else entirely.

It was not picturesque or fragrant in the conventional sense. It was raw, practical, and deeply human. For those who are wrinkling their nose while reading this, the “dried culture” has been passed down for centuries, born out of necessity for food preservation. It is an economy built on patience and labour with no visual aesthetics. Watching the process unfold, I was reminded how often we consume tradition without acknowledging the work that sustains it.

Through lunch, food became the entry point again, this time through Falonzee, in the heart of the city. A small place offering cuisine rooted in the ethnic communities of Cox’s Bazar. The flavours were unfamiliar yet comforting. Not because they tried to impress, but because they felt honest. This was not food adapted to fit metropolitan expectations. It existed on its own terms and was not afraid to let its patrons experience the culture through gastronomy.

The second day shifted the focus towards history in the Ramu region of the tourist city. Hiram Cox’s bungalow just stands quietly in the background, carrying a name that a lot of us use without even giving it a second thought. Cox’s Bazar, originally “Palongkee,” was named after Captain Hiram Cox, who had effectively been put in charge of dealing with the massive humanitarian fallout of Arakan refugees forced to flee from what is now Myanmar in the late 18th century.

Standing there, the name stopped feeling neutral. It became a reminder that this region has long been shaped by migration, displacement, and administrative intervention. The irony is impossible to ignore. A place now synonymous with leisure was once defined by refuge and resettlement. That history does not disappear simply because we no longer talk about it.

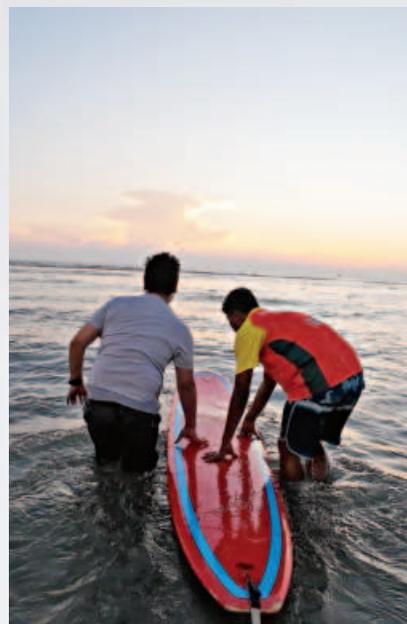
While returning to the main city,



I came across men repairing their sampans, the traditional boats used to venture deep into the sea. Watching them work was like witnessing knowledge passed through muscle memory. They spoke about distance, about staying out at sea for days, about trusting wood and instinct against waves that are rarely forgiving. After conversing with them for nearly an hour, I learned that the crescent shape of the boat helps to cut through the waves. And these boats are treated as a tool for survival, and the designs of Sampans have evolved through necessity.

Later that night, the fish markets near Kolatoli Beach came alive. Loud, chaotic, vibrant. Exotic catches lie out under harsh lights. Bargaining that felt almost theatrical. Yet, beneath the noise was an ecosystem at work. Fishermen, traders, buyers — all negotiating value in real time. It was messy, alive, and raw. You negotiate for the fish you like, and they will cook it for you. It is that simple.

At Mermaid Beach, the pace slowed further. A cooking lesson in barbecue crab might sound indulgent, but it



became one of the most grounding experiences of the trip. Learning directly from a chef, hands in marinade, fire responding to timing rather than instruction. As someone who enjoys cooking, it felt less like a lesson and more like recognition. That food, when stripped of presentation, returns us to something instinctive.

The sunset that followed was remarkable in the best possible way. A sky that looked like a canvas was being painted on with the golden hour in real time, along with a calm sea below.

On the final day, the Marine Drive unfolded under clear blue skies. Riding a scooty along the curve of the coast felt indulgent and free. The sea was impossibly blue. The kind of blue that you see on your screens makes you question, “Are oceans really that blue?” Somewhere along that ride, I signed up for surfing lessons.

Learning to balance on a surfboard is a humbling exercise. The sea does not care about confidence. It responds only to adjustment. Falling repeatedly, listening to instructions, understanding currents,

and learning about Bangladesh’s growing surfing and lifeguard culture shifted my perception again. This was not a novelty. It was discipline, training, and community.

By the time the trip was ending, it was not a single place that stayed with me, but a shift in how I was looking. The true colours of Cox’s Bazar begin to show when you arrive there without the instinct to take something from it. The moment I started paying attention to how things function — who shows up every day to keep them moving, and what the land quietly carries with it — and stopped thinking about what I could capture, frame, or package, the place began to feel different.

That realisation was slightly unsettling. As a writer, I am trained to compress places into neat ideas that travel well. Beaches, they cooperate. They give you symmetry, light, and scale without asking much in return. Forest paths, fish markets, workshops, kitchens, and neighbourhoods do not work that way. They ask you to slow down, to listen longer than is comfortable, and to accept that not everything is immediately legible or visually generous.

What we call sustainable tourism is not about avoiding the obvious or policing where people go. It is about widening the circle of attention, respecting different cultures, and preserving the landscape from littering. We have to let value exist outside the Instagram view. Travellers need to choose to spend their time and money in places that have always been here, doing their work quietly, long before anyone thought of them as experiences.

Cox’s Bazar does not need a new story written over it. It already has enough. It only has to be approached with a little more humility and a little less rush. The beach begins to communicate on its own terms when you take a brief step away from it. And once you hear it, it is hard to go back to looking at the place the same way again.

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