TETULIA where winter whispers early

From tea gardens and the winding Mahananda to fleeting glimpses of Kanchenjunga, Bangladesh's northernmost upazila offers a quiet escape into nature

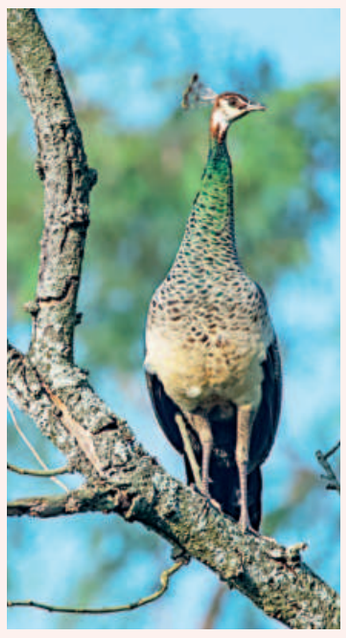














PHOTO: **FIROZ AL SABAH, MOSTAFA SHABUJ**

MOSTAFA SHABUJ

As summer loosens its grip on the rest of Bangladesh, Tetulia begins to feel the first whisper of winter. Wrapped in endless shades of green, the country's northernmost upazila offers a refreshing escape, where tea gardens stretch towards the horizon, the Mahananda river winds through the landscape, and the distant peaks of Kanchenjunga occasionally emerge against the sky.

In early October, when Dhaka swelters at 33–35 degrees Celsius, temperatures in Tetulia are often 2–5 degrees lower than in other parts of the country.

The journey from Panchagarh to the country's northernmost upazila unfolds through emerald paddy fields, low-lying tea gardens and tea factories, where processed leaves leave a henna-like fragrance in the air. Near Dak Bungalow Eco Park, along the Mahananda River on the Bangladesh-India border, the evening air carries the scent of wild Chatim flowers.

Tetulia town itself is adorned with colourful flower gardens, a community tradition dating back to the British era.

Autumn mornings bring another spectacle. Silvery plumes of kans grass (kash phool) sway along the riverbanks, where thousands of labourers begin extracting sand and stone as early as 5:00am. Farmers working in paddy fields, fishermen casting different types of nets in open water bodies, and schoolchildren cycling along paved roads are common sights that may evoke nostalgia in many.

Yet, for many travellers, Tentulia's greatest attraction lies far beyond its tea gardens and rivers.

Some 150 to 155 kilometres away rises Mount Kanchenjunga, the world's third-highest peak. On clear mornings, its snow-covered summit can be seen from different parts of Panchagarh, offering a rare glimpse of the Himalayas from Bangladesh.

But the mountain is elusive.

Locals say Kanchenjunga is generally visible between October and December, when conditions are favourable. Even then, catching a glimpse of the majestic peak requires patience and a bit of luck.

During the last week of October and the first week of November in 2022, I was fortunate enough to see the mountain twice.

This year, however, my six-day stay in Tetulia, from October 3 to 8, brought no such reward.

Every morning, I joined hundreds of visitors at the Dak Bungalow overlooking the Mahananda. All eyes were fixed on the distant horizon, waiting for the clouds to part and the mountain to appear.

The wait this year ended in disappointment, but the anticipation itself seemed part of the experience.

Few people know this elusive spectacle better than local photographer Firoz Al Sabah, whose photographs of Kanchenjunga and wildlife have helped showcase Tetulia's beauty to travellers in different ways.

For the past 15 years, Firoz's experience



has taught him the conditions that make it visible.

On the night of October 5, I sat with him beside the Mahananda. Beyond the tea gardens, lights along the Indian border shimmered in the darkness, their reflections dancing on the river's cool, flowing water.

Firoz described seeing Kanchenjunga from Panchagarh as nothing short of a miracle.

According to him, the air becomes exceptionally thin the day before the mountain is likely to appear. He regards the sensation of that thin breeze as a sign of favourable visibility the following morning.

Across the 150-kilometre stretch, clouds, rain, fog and pollution can easily obscure the mountain. Firoz said heavy rainfall in October helps clear the atmosphere by settling pollution particles.

Another sign, he said, is the visibility of thousands of lights in Kurseong, a hill town in India's Darjeeling, which can sometimes be seen with the naked eye from Tetulia on the preceding night.

Beyond Kanchenjunga, the region offers its own surprises, from wildlife encounters to historical landmarks.

During winter, wild peacocks occasionally cross into forests near the Indian border. Firoz said a peacock was reported breeding at a site in Tetulia this year.

He believes the birds could return permanently to Bangladesh if suitable, secure habitats are ensured. According to the 2015 IUCN Red List, the species is extinct in the wild in Bangladesh.

Another elusive bird, the Black Francolin, inhabits the tea gardens. Found nowhere else in Bangladesh outside Panchagarh, it breeds during summer. Its distinctive mating calls make it easier to locate during April, May and June, before it retreats into relative obscurity for the rest of the year.

History has also left its imprint on the landscape.

The Rock Museum, established in 1997 by Dr Nazmul Haque, then principal of Panchagarh Government Women's College, houses hundreds of geological, archaeological and anthropological specimens that offer insights into the sub-Himalayan region's history and culture.

About 17 kilometres from Panchagarh town, in Mirzapur village of Atwari upazila, stands the Mirzapur Shahi Mosque. Archaeologists believe it was built in 1665 during the Mughal era by Sheikh Malek Uddin Akhtaruzzaman. With its intricate craftsmanship and ornamentation, the mosque remains a place of worship, where villagers continue to offer their five daily prayers.

Another historical attraction is Maharajar Dighi in Bhitargarh, under Amarkhana union of Panchagarh Sadar upazila, 16 kilometres from the district town.

Spread across more than 54 acres and surrounded by greenery, the reservoir is believed to be at least 1,500 years old. Local folklore links it to King Jaleshwar or King Prithu, who is believed to have ordered its excavation. Ancient brick-built steps and ghats remain bearing the stamp of time.

Tetulia's growing appeal has also transformed local tourism. Since 2022, more than 40 hotels, motels and cottages have opened through private, government and NGO initiatives. A Tourist Police Zone has also been established.

Depending on the amenities, room rates range from Tk 1,000 to Tk 4,500 per night.

As tourist numbers peak between October and December, booking well in advance is advisable.

Travellers can reach Panchagarh from Dhaka by bus, with fares ranging from Tk 1,000 to Tk 1,700, or by the Ekota, Drutojan or Panchagarh Express trains, with fares between Tk 550 and Tk 2,000. Alternatively, they can fly to Saidpur Airport and travel by road for about three hours to reach Tetulia.

Travelling through this beautiful region, however, comes with a challenge. Hundreds of trucks carrying sand and stone along the Banglabandha-Panchagarh road raise clouds of dust, causing considerable discomfort to visitors and highlighting the need for an alternative bypass.



Despite the inconvenience, Tetulia retains its quiet charm. Even when Kanchenjunga stays hidden behind the clouds, the tea gardens, riverbanks, cool evenings and unhurried pace of life make the journey worthwhile.

Mustafa Sabuj, Bogura correspondent of The Daily Star, is a travel enthusiast.

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PHOTO: **FIROZ AL SABAH**