

Bangladesh



October 1st-11th
2016



..train from Dhaka to Srimangar

Arrival at 05:45 in the morning we headed for Visa-On-Arrival section to get visa (51\$). We did have an invitation letter that our travel agency said could be helpful – and it probably was. The whole procedure seemed very much at random and up to the willingness of the local visa officers. **Picked up by our local guide “Riaz”** we headed straight to the train station where we stocked up some water/soft drinks and filled our cooler with ice. Very colourful setting at the train station with trains coming and going completely packed with people – some older once also with people on top of the train.

Our guide **Riazul Huq works for Bengal Tours**, the only major tour operator of size in Bangladesh. I contacted them with a suggested travel plan and places to visit. They then took this and “packaged” a complete program “all-included” such as transport, accommodation, guide and local access www.bengaltours.com . As you’ll need invitation letter (although visa can be obtained upon arrival VOA) – this is/can be a hassle and at the vim of the immigration officer – I letter is highly recommended.



Dhaka – a city of 14 million people ...

The country has some 160 million inhabitants. Islam is the predominant religion with some 98% of the population. Alcohol is not allowed to be sold, but can be found in “black” bars.



A world of colours in Marovezo

We found an amazing variety of Chameleons in the sanctuary...



Our journey up to Srimangal, the tea capitol of Bangladesh, took some 4 ½ hours. After a quick stop at the local market we then headed for our hotel – Srimangal Inn - to check in. We had lunch at the Bangla restaurant - Kutum Bari – which was very good. In the afternoon we went up to the tea plantations to have a look. It was Sunday, so not very many workers out in the field picking tea leaves.



After an early breakfast we picked-up our chaperon (local police man) and headed out to visit the Lawacherra forest to see Holok Gibbons and for a visit to the Khasia tribal village. We didn't see any Gibbons, but we trekked a short distance up to the tribal village. We saw some Makak monkeys and birds on the way. We walked along the railway which was covered by rain forest beautifully laid out and caught a train passing by us. We made another try for the Tea plantations, and were rewarded with getting pictures of women and men picking leaves this day. We also stopped at some more rural tribal villages – which did not seem so remote as was described.





The Lawacherra rainforest

Leaving the tea plantation by long train journey – going south...

Our main event for the day was to transport ourselves **from Srimangal to Chittagong by train**. Again, a local police man joined us on the train and took one of the 8 seats we had booked. He also made sure not too many people came into our train compartment to stand around. The other compartments were smack filled with many standing all the way to Chittagong (8 hours).

We then arrived at around 8 PM in the evening to Chittagong with the slow train from Srimangal. Surprisingly enough we arrived ahead of schedule and left 1 hour later than scheduled. I don't know how this was possible, but it was. The train was supposed to be air-conditioned, but was not. We travelled 1st class and were accompanied by the local train police who sat next to us. We had booked 8 seats – just to make sure we could stretch our feet and also fit our luggage.



..on the roof-top of the train – risky? Oh, yes...





The coastal city of Chittagong

...the largest sea-port with some 3,5 mio people ...



We started off by **visiting the Fish market**. A bit too crowded even for my liking. After this we went and made a stop at the **Chittagong Sadardar DH80 (Salt-producing factory)**. We were told that due to the unfavourable weather conditions – the salt collection and refinery had dropped to an all-time low. We could still see the areas where the salt was cleaned in various stages. We also got to see the unloading (manually work) of salt from the vessels at port. This was very interesting and provided great photo-opportunity for us. We also saw off-loading of imported corn in sacks. All done by manual labour.



Continuing on to stop at the Shrine Bayzid Bostami. Adjacent to the shrine was a small pond with turtles. These were said to be sacred and were feed and petted by people. This was said to bring luck.

..at the docs where fishing boats come in!





The salt workers & the port..

...we visited the sensitive shipbreaking yard in Chittagong...



Our last and main stop here in Chittagong was the famous Shipbreaking yard. We had to travel for one hour across town to get to this place. A huge area with lots and lots of old cargo ships - run aground - were being dismantled piece by piece. Here the main object was to find a fishing boat who could take us out into the bay and take us closer to have a look at the old ships. This is a precarious business as it is governmental operated business and a business which they do not want press and media to see/hear too much about. This especially since they use labourers who are not properly looked after in terms of safety measurements, work conditions and payment. There are also many kids working at this very dangerous work-place.

It is sealed off to a certain extent and they will shoot at you if you get too close to the dismantled ships. They don't want photographs taken and distributed in the press. We managed to get out and have a look, not too close however. Having walked around a bit as well and looked at all the fishing boats and fishermen also here, we decided we had seen enough and headed back into centre of Chittagong as most of the day had gone by. We had **lunch at Ghaharana restaurant** in the business district of town.

..The shipbreaking yard in Chittagong





The hill-tracts of Bandarban

Our first encounter with the Malagasy National Parks...

We departed early from Chittagong heading for the hill tracts and Bandarban. It took an approximate 3 ½ hours by car. We had to report into the check-point just before arrival and showing our passports and permits to visit the area. This was first rejected and then accepted with some “off-limits” areas. A police waited for us to join us and chaperon us yet again on all our activities. This is the third police we have had on our trip so far.

Weekly city market in Bandarban. We were lucky to hit the once-per-week market day (Wednesday) when the city centre is filled with traders selling all their goods. Especially interesting as many of the indigenous hill tribes also were here to sell/buy

products and food. We then checked in at our hill-bungalows a bit outside the city at a place called Hilltops. Completely secluded in the forest overlooking the beautiful valley.

We then made trips to visit the following three different hill-tribes: **Tripura hill tribe, Murong hill tribe and the Bawm hill tribe.** It was quite steep and very slippery terrain, as it had been raining just before we took off. They were, as is often the case with these indigenous groups, selling local handicrafts including necklaces. The stops at the second and third village – we did not really get to take much photos as they were very shy and tried their best avoiding getting caught on picture.





The Marma hill tribe and more..

Amazing landscape close to the Myanmar border...

the Marma hill tribe. This felt quite genuine. We distributed pencils and lolly pops to the kids – just to give something. Very colourful and interesting visit. Then we needed to dispose of our accompanied policemen at the check-point entering into the district. We gave our policeman an I-pod which made him very happy indeed. He had actually allowed us to visit one or two villages which usually are not allowed to visit. So – a win-win solution here. We thereafter headed back the 3 ½ hours to Chittagong for a quick lunch at the same – **excellent restaurant** – where we had eaten a few days earlier – **Ambrosia**. Then it was straight off to the airport for a two-legged flight to Jessore via Dhaka with a 1 hour stop over.

We arrived at 8 PM and then had some **2 hours' transport to Khulna where we stayed overnight.** We had police escort all the way driving in front of our car with 4 armed police officers. They drove with blue-lights and sirens all the way. This felt kind of crazy and a bit of over-kill, but again with recent incidents up in Dhaka they are not letting any western tourists out of



Local market with live frogs on sale – Bandarban hills!





From Khulna to Mongla and further..

On the road again – seeing much of the country side...

After breakfast we again took off (and again with police escort) **to Mongla**. We took a small boat crossing the river to board our vessel which would take us into **the Sundarbans mangrove rain forest**. We had a vessel and crew all to our self with two cabins with double beds. Cruising slowly down the canals/ivers all through the day. We made two stops – one walking-trail (short one) as it is vertically impossible to walk in the mangrove with the mud/water and sharp mangrove.

Managed to see a couple of **Monitor Lizards, monkeys and a snake**, but that was it. Then we also used a small boat and went up river on a much smaller water way. We did however not see very much wild life apart from the odd bird. Lunch as well as dinner was served on-board the vessel. We had to move and anchor near the Wild-life office with guards, as it is only 3 days ago since the captured 11 pirates who had been roaming the area. The actually used our very vessel to transport them back out from the mangrove to imprison them.



Various pictures from the Sundarbans mangrove forest





Visiting the Bagherat Mosque.

The mosque of 60 domes. One of the holiest places in B-desh.

Spent the night anchored out in the Sundarbans somewhere – pitch dark – only the stars out. I did not sleep very well and am still down with a cold – coughing a lot as well. I was bitten badly last night/evening – not sure if it was by mosquitos or by bed bugs. **We took the boat back towards Mongla and stopped at a crocodile breeding farm on the way and also watched some dolphins in the waters.**

A new driver was waiting once we got ashore and transported us up on bad roads to yet another river which we needed to cross on a barge packed with people and cars. **Our next stop was the Bagherat Mosque dating back to 1459** (60 domes mosque) and the tomb of Khan Jahan, Takhur's pond and a few other domes around. Having done this, **we continued up on small and poor roads all the way to Barisal** where we checked **into Hotel Grand Park**. A very nice hotel in an otherwise very shanty town. Dinner was enjoyed at the hotel.



Waiting for the ferry to pick-us-up – crossing the river!





The floating market of Harta.

Remote part of Bangladesh on desperately poor roads!

Today we started at 05:30 in order to get to **Harta Floating market- Odjupur district - ca: 1 ½ hours' drive from Barisal.** This Sunday market is on the river and quite busy with people in their boats selling vegetables, fruits and plants.

We also visited a local village and were invited for tea and bread. Where ever one goes or stops you immediately get a group of people joining and watching. It is very rare to see foreigners – especially in the very remote country side areas. Back at the hotel for a quick shower and lunch – then off to the ferry which took us up to Dhaka. We came in late and arrived at the hotel only at around 10:30 PM – our **hotel Laurel in the Guhlsan district.**



People at and around Harta village and market place...





Back in Dhaka before departure

A mega capitol with some 14 million people...



A full day in Dhaka – it was time to see this melting pot with over 16 million people, one of the world's mega cities. After breakfast we headed down town and started a walk-about tour in Old Dhaka and **walked along Hindu street which is filled with “match-box” sized shops** and very colourful. From there we continued our **walk down to Sadarghat – the waterfront** – where we arrived late last evening – and saw a myriad of boats and activities.

We made **a stop at Ahsan Manzil (the pink palace)** which has been restored in the 80-ies. Beautifully situated in the old town. From there we took a rickshaw and saw more of the winding streets. Lunch was taken at the Chinese Restaurant the Golden Chimney. The afternoon was used to walk around in the market areas to look at the commerce and look at people. **The last stop was the Lalbagh Fort dating back to 1677.** A huge area with three separate buildings, a wall around the hole area and very sacred mausoleum visited by many Bangladeshis.

In the evening we were off to try **the Nordic Club in Gulshan district where all the embassies were located.** The club is a meeting place and water-hole for those westerners & expatriates who primarily live in Dhaka. A passport check, a sign-in and a scan before you were let in at this security controlled establishment. Here you can be served alcohol, which is otherwise banned throughout the country.

The pink palace and other sites in Old Dhaka district...

