



TIGER TRACKS IN THE SUNDARBANS

Recent tragic events in Bangladesh have highlighted the ways in which the people of poorer countries can suffer to feed the West's hunger for cheap goods. Even before the factory collapse that left more than a thousand dead, a trip to the country in 2010 left me in no doubt as to the level of our responsibility for such calamities.

The vacation was the result of one of those dares where you egg each other on until there's no backing out: "What's the least appropriate place to go on holiday?" A few months later three middle-aged friends found themselves on a ten-day trip to Bangladesh, on our way to look for tigers.

It did not start well: over Iranian airspace the chief steward shouted that we were to strap ourselves in and not move because the plane had to turn back, and then ominously added, "for some reason". After an hour during which each of us silently wondered where the hijackers were taking us, we landed back in Kuwait airport, where we were met on the tarmac by fire engines. "Don't worry, we won't put you back on the same plane," the steward reassured us with a smile as we disembarked.

Arriving at Dhaka airport six hours late we braved a maelstrom of touts to hire a taxi from the least aggressive of the drivers, and spent the next two and a half hours travelling five miles into the capital, crammed into a cage in the back of a three-wheeled motorcycle rickshaw, thrusting inch by inch through gridlocked, smoke-belching traffic.

Despite the promise offered by the glitzy website, our hotel was a firetrap. There were no windows, there was red spit from chewing paan on the wall, buzzing insects, and three camp beds with no bedding. When I went to brush my teeth I leaned on the sink and it fell off the wall.

As night fell we ventured by foot into the city centre. The streets are unpaved and teem with a manic crush of pedestrians, cycle rickshaws and horse-drawn carriages. There is no street lighting. It had an intensity only rivalled by my experiences of India, but with the technology dialled back fifty years. At one point I lost my friends and, lost in the dark in a sea of humanity, with neither a mobile phone nor the address of the hotel, felt panic rising.



Sadarghat

Despite my discomfort, compared to my other experiences in the subcontinent I found the people of Dhaka to be charming. In Delhi I had been unable to walk more than ten metres down the street before being overwhelmed by a depressing surge of beggars, skinny babies in their arms and amputees proffering their stumps. By contrast, despite it

being a poorer country we were able to move about largely undisturbed. Eventually a few smiling people indicated to me which direction the only other foreigners in the street had gone, and we finally bumped into each other again at Sadarghat. At this frenzied port in the

middle of the city we saw vast ferries load up with families and goods, and watched sadly as the body of a woman who had just fallen from one of the boats was dragged from the river.

Bangladesh is a land of water. The southern half of the country is essentially the delta of the Ganges, and boasts more than eight hundred named rivers in a land area only slightly larger than that of England. With few resources to build infrastructure, the country uses its labyrinthine river network for long-distance transport. The next day we stood by the vast and muddy Buriganga and watched a homeless multitude wash themselves while oarsmen sculled wooden water taxis between huge laden barges, scarcely an inch of hull above water.



All aboard!

Though Bangladesh's second city is only 130 kilometres south-west of Dhaka as the crow flies, it is around 600 kilometres by train, because the tracks have to travel north, to use one of the country's few bridges, then west as far as the Indian border before turning south again. In a first class sleeper on a decommissioned Chinese train, we were treated to a hierarchy of visitors: a young man who worked in computers and spoke some

English, who disappeared and returned with his uncle, a businessman who imports gypsum in lorries that drive across Assam from the hills of Bhutan. He in turn deferred to a friendly army officer, who told us in Sandhurst English how he had served with the UN in Lebanon.

We arrived in Khulna before dawn, and awoke men asleep on their cycle rickshaws, who drowsily raced each other to our hotel. Sipping soft drinks on the balcony of the £15-a-night Presidential Suite, we gazed onto a stall below—a man who repairs banknotes with a scalpel and glue—and planned how we would arrive at our ultimate destination: the Sundarbans. Straddling the Indian border, at more than 4,000 square kilometres, it is the largest mangrove swamp in the world and in part the country's saviour during the 2004 tsunami. Vast, impenetrable, and home to the Bengal tiger.

The sole travel service in town arranged for us to be driven to where we would descend into the forest. We were driven, honking, into the waterlands of south Bangladesh, rice paddies swept away by a cash crop of low-maintenance fish farms, their produce aimed at the international market. The driver explained that because of the lack of subsistence food available since this trend began, rice now has to be imported into the area, pushing prices up and meaning that the owners are getting rich while former rice farmers teeter on the brink of starvation, even in a land of such fecund abundance.

"We do not think you need an armed guard today," said the captain at the jetty. "There were some pirates here last week but the police blew them up." Thus reassured, we boarded a rickety wooden boat and entered the swamp. We pattered down the greasy brown Rupsha river, drinking sweet tea and eating fruit, and at the confluence with the Mongla we watched the pink flash of river dolphins as they preyed on swirls of fish where the rivers meet. Then the boat turned a bend and we were alone in a world of mangroves and mud.

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(to be concluded)



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After hours meandering between the trees, we pulled up on a bank and found ourselves at the end of a walkway built over the thick swamp for the few visitors who come, which allowed us to walk between the amphibious root systems, the only way one could ever do this without sinking to one's death.

A mile or so of avoiding aggressive monkeys begging for scraps, below us we finally spied what we had come for: the fresh tracks of a Bengal tiger. There are fewer than 500 left in the wild in Bangladesh, and the chance of seeing one is almost non-existent. Even to have seen paw prints was an immense privilege.

We chugged back for a few hours, passing a far row of huts isolated on a muddy sandbank, used by prostitutes to service the river traffic—one of the worst existences I can possibly imagine—then to the ancient mosques at Bagerhat, and a miniscule village of indigenous Hindus clustered around a thousand-year old temple.

To return to Dhaka we had decided to take the Rocket, a British-built paddle steamer, eighty years long in the tooth. On our way by car to the Rocket's ghat at Barisal we were stopped by a mile-wide torrent plied by a flat yellow barge, laden with several hundred tons of lorries, buses, cars and people. Water hyacinth, a cosmetic import from South America and the fastest-growing biomass on earth, now chokes waterways throughout Asia, and here huge clumps of it careened downstream. When the ferry finally disgorged its cargo on our side, the plants accumulated in the propellers and on the bows of the boat, and passengers jumped over the side onto the floating vegetation and pushed it off with their feet as our ferry twisted into the roaring current.

When we arrived and began a frustrating search for the Rocket's ticket office, we were followed round by students wanting to practice their English. I took the advantage to ask about the scourge of fundamentalism. "In Bangladesh you can be devout if you like," said one of the students, "but nobody's going to hassle you if you aren't".



Car Ferry

After hours we found the place with its dusty Bakelite phones and creaking ceiling fans, and were informed that nobody knew where the Rocket was, nor when it would pass by again, nor whether it had broken down. If we wanted to travel on it we would have to sit at the dock and wait, possibly for days.

We needed not to miss our flight home, so we made our way down to the ghat where lay a dozen modern metal hulks the size of cross-channel ferries, low in the water with a vast open bottom deck on which hundreds of families set up camp for the night. We had no idea what we were meant to do to get a ticket, so we did what one sometimes has to do in these

situations: we made ourselves someone else's problem. We sat on the bottom deck of one bound for Dhaka and refused to move. After a couple of hours of head scratching and pointing, someone finally ushered us to a cabin, and a tout arrived with tickets for us.

As night fell, the ferry slipped its moorings and began to charge up narrow rivers in absolute darkness. A searchlight mounted on the front of the boat was switched on for ten seconds out of every minute, and swept from side to side to spot riverbanks, trees, and tiny wooden boats night-fishing in the centre of the channel—then switched off again. I sat awake on the deck with my shoelaces untied and a waterproof bag with money, passport, mobile phone, and anything else I might need to take in a swim from a shipwreck to a muddy bank in the middle of nowhere.

Hours of trepidation later, a lone man walked to the bow and unrolled a prayer mat to prostrate himself, and I knew that dawn would come soon. I stood beside the cockpit and watched the captain negotiate the waterways with a reckless, skilled hand, and saw the flares of arc welding as barefoot men



Father and Daughter

churned out new ferries on the night shift. The river traffic began to increase, and we dodged between barges as the suburbs of Dhaka began to appear in the foggy dawn.

Despite the mocking of my peers my nerves had not been entirely unwarranted: that same night one of the Sundarban ferries had gone over in India, and forty-six people had drowned. This was the dry season, when the rivers were relatively calm.

We returned to the relative luxury of an NGO hostel and wandered a middle-class area of the city where we chatted to the sons of local industry, privileged young men who spoke English and whose universal dream was to leave. We sampled birani—the simple parent of the familiar biryani—as well as curried fish and expertly made parathas. A bookseller tried to sell me *Mein Kampf*.

On our flight home all the white passengers were upgraded. My seatmate was a girl from England who had been visiting her sister, who worked in the apparel division of an extremely well-known UK supermarket, visiting garment factories and assessing the quality of the products. Never let a British clothing retailer tell you that they don't know about the conditions in their factories in the developing world. All our familiar high-street names have representatives on the ground in Bangladesh, and they know what's going on. Furthermore, despite the dangers clearly inherent in all aspects of life there, this should in no way diminish our perception of the value of their lives, nor the suffering of those left behind after a tragedy.

This is not a country I would recommend to a casual tourist, but it was endlessly fascinating. We came for the tigers, but my memories are of the Bangladeshis. Those I encountered were among the most warm, friendly and generous people I have met in all my travels. I will return.

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