

Why Dhaka, you might ask? In my neighborhood in Paris we have many Bangladeshi's. The men with the excellent creperie across the street who are open and do a bustling business until 2 am (4 am on weekends), directly opposite a McDonalds! Also, several mobile phone accessory/repair shops nearby and the Western Union guy at the corner are all Bangladeshi's. So, since on this trip to India I was going to be virtually next door in Calcutta (now Kolkata) it seemed important to go.

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries on the planet with 163 million people in a country the size of New York State (which has about 19 million people). Dhaka itself has 20 million people, almost the size of Bombay (Mumbai) and larger than Calcutta's 11 million. Supposedly 2000 new people move into the city daily and significant road infrastructure and Metro construction are underway. The country's population density at 1,115 per square kilometer contrasts sharply with the 10 per square kilometer of recently-visited Mauritania! The country is crisscrossed by rivers and their deltas, also contrasting with Mauritania's desert.

We took an early morning one-hour flight from Calcutta on Biman Bangladesh Airways, the national airline. It was mostly businessmen on the flight. Our visa on arrival (\$51) process was straight-forward and all of the officials were friendly and helpful, even chatty. I don't think they get a lot of tourists and as two elderly western ladies traveling independently, we were probably a curiosity! We continued to be a curiosity as we toured, much as we had been in South Korea when outside of Seoul.

The driver we had arranged from the hotel was waiting and we headed off into the hustle bustle of a major Indian subcontinent city. Of course, we were used to that rhythm after almost a month in India.

Dhaka is known for its traffic congestion consisting primarily of cycle-rickshaws, many highly



decorated, tuk-tuks and buses – some even double decker. Things move so slowly that it is easy for pedestrians to weave their way through intersections. The rickshaw decorations are made from recycled tin and can be purchased as souvenirs.



The People's Republic of Bangladesh is a majority-Muslim (90%) secular country whose language is Bangla, the same as in West Bengal State next door in India. We enjoyed hearing the call to prayer, but this is not a country where all activity stops five times per day for prayer. The Prime Minister is a woman as are the heads of the other two major political parties.

Our hotel, FARS Hotel and Resorts, is located in central Dhaka, nearby to Old Dhaka. It obviously serves the business community and the staff were very service-oriented (we were probably a bit of an oddity here as well). From the upper floors I could look out at surrounding rooftops hung with laundry (similar to my own in Agadir) and down at the traffic below.



After lunch in the lovely dining room and a brief rest I ventured out onto the street (without camera) at about 4 pm (sunset is about 5:15). It took a while for it to dawn on me that there were almost no women walking on the street. In an hour I saw two women who stopped for a street-vendor snack, three women in an optics shop, two women in a sweets shop and two beggars. Apparently, they cycle-rickshaw from one stop to another. The street was fascinating,

an eclectic mix of auto and truck repair parts, several optical shops, a very high-end crystal chandelier shop, a bookseller and sidewalk vendors setting up for the evening's business. Although the sidewalks were jammed, I was not hassled in any way. Nearby were the Press Club, a performing arts center, a park, plus an area of tables for dining on street food.

The women I did see were dressed in salwar kameez, or colorful draped robes. Their hair was loosely covered and I saw no veiled faces. This contrasted with the Muslim women we had been seeing in India who



typically wore black or dark long robes that contrasted sharply with the brilliantly colored saris and salwar kameez of the non-Muslim women. The next day we would see a larger variety of garments, definitely including some women completely covered and others without hair covering.



Something I had not seen (or noticed) before was that many of the men had henna'd their hair and/or beard. I asked if this was a recent fashion fad and was



told, no, that the Prophet Mohammed was thought to have had red hair.

In preparation for this visit I had read books by two Bangladeshi authors, Tahmina Anam (The Good Muslim, A Golden Age and The Bones of Grace) and Taslima Nasrin (Shame). I am currently reading The Storm by Arif Anwar. These brought home the realities of a nation which endured a bloody civil war to gain their independence from Pakistan (ironically on my birthday in 1971). I highly recommend these authors.



An Indian lady friend from Calcutta and Paris connected us with Guide Tours, Ltd with whom we arranged a full day tour, “A Glance of Dhaka” for our one full day. In the morning we were able to visit Curzon Hall, presently the University of Dhaka campus, but previously (1904) the Town Hall and military barracks. The architecture was similar to the colonial architecture in Calcutta.

We visited Dhakeshwari Temple to the Hindu Goddess Durga from which each year the figures we saw are paraded to the Ganges and set afloat with new deities put in place. The

Durga festival had occurred shortly before our visit.



Parts of Old Dhaka feature very narrow lanes, and as it was early morning food vendors were set up.



I became somewhat obsessed with the number of cooking pots I was seeing being transported, but I suppose if you are feeding twenty million people.....



Old Dhaka has some heavy industry as well as schools, mosques and markets.



We visited the Armenian Church, built in 1781– one of three remaining on the sub-continent (the one in Chennai I had visited on my first trip and the third is in Calcutta which I didn't have time for this visit). Worship services occur only at Christmas and Easter but the site and garden are beautifully maintained by a second-generation caretaker Hindu man and his Muslim wife.

Armenians were very active in commerce and trading from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. As



always, the gravestones told interesting stories.

We had no time to get to the National Assembly Building, designed by U.S. Architect Louis Kahn, which was one of my priorities. So, a reason for a return trip. (Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.)



An additional form of transport is the mini-bus which holds 12 people seated and as many more as can cram their way onto it.



The afternoon cruise on the Shitalakhya River, departing from nearby Demna, was fascinating and reflected, I felt, the full range of life in the country. Our guide said that of the 900 rivers in Bangladesh, 898 are considered female and only two, male, being the only ones with no branches.

En route to the boat we had seen plastics and metals recycling and along the riverfront we saw newsprint drying which would be converted into boxes for chocolate.



On land we had passed more “industrial” activity including logs, furniture-making, and heavy machine parts.



We also passed backwater areas with buildings on stilts, wet gardening (rice?) and fish trapping including the “Chinese” fishing net system we had seen in Fort Cochin, India.





Here is our boat on which we had a captain, assistant, cook, our guide and we two ladies.



We saw traditional forms of transport, gardening and fishing contrasting with a giant factory processor of rice, wheat, oil and salt.



The banks of the river are farmed for vegetables. Currently (winter) we saw cabbage, cauliflower, pumpkin, beans and carrots plus red spinach in the water. In summer tomatoes and potatoes and sugar cane are grown. The fishing is by traps and nets. I include a lot of photos of these activities which tell the story better than words.



Contrasting with the mechanization, one saw human transport of sacks of sand, rice and salt, which I have also seen in Indonesia and Dubai.







Sand dredging occurs on the Megna river in the north plus in the ocean; salt mining occurs in the Chittagong and Khulna districts and both are offloaded here. The boats for these activities also come in a wide variety of types.



There are ferries crossing the river including small and medium-sized for passengers and another somewhat



larger one accommodating vehicles.

One of the paddleboat tour boats known as “Rocket” was docked for maintenance. It is a vintage paddlewheel boat, over 100 years old (there are actually four of them) that do overnight river trips from Dhaka to Khulna. The name comes from the time when they were the fastest boats on the river.



Having just read The Bones of Grace, which takes place in Chittagong, Bangladesh where ships are dismantled for scrap, a

highlight was to see new river-going bulk carriers being built from those gigantic scrap metal panels.



And, of course, throughout the trip we were observing life along the river, and being observed in return.





Towards the end of our cruise we stopped at Noapara village where Jamdani weaving takes place. Two-person teams were weaving very fine silk or cotton. One person is creating the design and the unique feature is that they are embroidering the fabric on the loom as they go. A day's work achieves about 4", a saree requiring six months' of work.



We looked at scarves for purchase after the visit.

The narrow path through the village was active and we returned to see our boat pointed "home" after a very exciting full day.





Back at the hotel in time for dinner I enjoyed a local beer. The brand is Hunter which I found auspicious since I am a Sagittarius.



There is a lot to be seen in Bangladesh, especially the vast Sundarban region with the largest area of mangrove in the world, the Chittagong region with Cox's Bazar, the world's longest natural sand beach, and hill stations, plus many significant religious and archeological sites such as the Mosque City of Bagerhat. So, this "taste" will hopefully be followed by another more extensive visit in the future.