



Bangladesh: let's go rural!

My minders collected me from this relatively grand hotel in central Dhaka. We piled into a jeep; boss with driver up front negotiating the traffic bedlam of the morning rush. Slowly the squalid suburban slums gave way to palm trees and paddy fields.



The road to the south of the capital was a single lane highway; smooth and straight. Any potential for speed was severely limited by the numbers of people, animals, and vehicles in our path. The variety of obstacles that could occupy a road like this appeared infinite, including over-laden bullock carts, motorbikes with three or four passengers, dilapidated

buses, thundering trucks; even a stretched tuk tuk! The sight of vehicles emblazoned with wonderfully hand-painted signs was accompanied by a cacophony of horn sounds.

By midday the *River Padma* was in view, flowing towards the *Bay of Bengal*, heavy with waters from the *Brahmaputra* and *Ganges*. From a crossing point on the northern bank it was not possible to see the other side. The *Padma* looked more like a sea than a river!

We sat and waited through the extreme heat of the day, as ferry after ferry grounded its ramp on the sandy shore, before swallowing vehicles of all sizes into its bowels. At one stage a truck slipped off the ramp, blocking access by others, which caused an interminable delay. Finally, after more than three hours of waiting, and just as darkness was descending, we were beckoned



Bus loading onto a ferry to cross the Padma River.

forward; then our driver cautiously maneuvered the jeep up the metal tracks to join the others, packed tightly in rows on the deck.

Once safely on board, my newfound companions proceeded to unleash a variety of delectable foods from a range of stainless steel cannisters – or *tiffin* as they are called locally - packed back at base earlier in the day. The crossing took about forty-five minutes, and it was during that time I came to realise a couple of important points that would make my stay so enjoyable. Firstly, that Bangladeshi folk have an extraordinarily friendly and fun-loving quality; secondly, for anyone like me, who likes curry, the finely spiced Bangladeshi variety is simply unbeatable!

After climbing up the southern bank, it required a good driver, who knew the route well, to get us to our destination: a project base on one of the islands of the *Bengal Delta*. At one stage we dropped down a cliff-like embankment to ford across a smaller river, then up the other side and onwards, our road ahead charted by a tunnel like glow from the headlights, as we knifed our way through the overhanging foliage.

After a late arrival in the dark of night, I remember waking the next morning to find myself in a lush green tropical setting, with manicured plants bordering winding pathways between bamboo cottages. This was the first staging point of my assignment in Bangladesh, from where I would fan out, travelling by motorbike, along the levy banks next to flooded paddies, intent on reaching village-based projects.

Now in retrospect, and many years later, I can say without doubt that my four-week stay turned out to be one of the most enjoyable experiences of my life.



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