

Transcript of Podcast 056: Bangladesh

{Intro -

{Ian M Packham:

Having spent three months walking close to 700 miles, or 1000 kilometres, from the southernmost to northernmost corners of the country in a roughly northwesterly direction, I guess I know Bangladesh as well as as well as any visitor or tourist is going to, well that's obviously a very dangerous thing to say.

}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a fortnightly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Brit with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello!

Well, you may have noticed I have been absent for the last two weeks. This is because, well, I've been mostly offline. My intention had been to record this episode a week in advance, but I guess we all knew that was never going to happen.

The last week of March I was at my uncle's house. This was mainly because, on the Friday 1st April, the team I work with in my day job were having a night out in Cardiff (it was a 'leaving do' for a couple of people who'd moved elsewhere earlier this year), and I figured it was about time I met them. The organisation I work for is based in South Wales, and as you might imagine, Glasgow to South Wales is not an easy or quick commute, due to not having easy connecting transport links. My uncle lives in the nearby Forest of Dean, so it makes for an easy stopping-off point; plus I could work from his house just as easily as I can from my flat. I'd taken my microphone, headphones, etc down just in case I got a chance to record (and so I could use them for company meetings anyway), but ... no recording happened. Obviously.

As an aside, I worked from the office on that Friday, the first time I'd set foot in an office for, oddly, almost exactly four years to the day since I left my old job (Thursday 29th March 2018, the Friday that year was Good Friday). Also oddly, it felt almost as empty; the day before Easter in a marketing department was never going to have been a busy day at the office. Anyway, it was good to finally meet in person the people I'd heard on team meetings and seen the profile pictures of every day. It was decent enough night too. - people kept buying me beer and we all got thrown out of a pub for reasons I won't go into right now, suffice to say you shouldn't answer back to a bouncer.

Then, after a long trip back to Glasgow on the Sunday that I really must remember to claim back part of the cost of the journey of because my train from Cheltenham to Birmingham was 65 minutes late, and a quick overnight in my own bed, I then headed off for several days hiking around the nearby island of Arran. It's only a short train ride from Glasgow, but it feels like a whole different world. I'll probably talk about it more in some random future pod or blogpost (but let me at least visit the other nearby islands of Bute and Cumbrae first!), but it was, almost, a very pleasant trip. A while ago, one of my Scottish Tweeps kind of challenged me to hike with them, so we ended up deciding to hike the Arran Coastal Way. Spoiler Alert: it didn't go quite as planned. Partly because it was wet for the first half of the week, and camping in the rain is absolutely not fun, but mainly because my dyspraxia doesn't lend itself well to scrambling over huge boulders by the shoreline. Especially when they're damp and my hiking sandals are so worn they no longer have decent tread. My hiking companion overrode my fear of failure when she feared we might be cut off by the tide, which was slightly embarrassing as it meant it was my fault we had to turn back, and somewhere in that adventure on the Tuesday I did something to the back my right hand that caused it to ache for, well, it's still aching now, not that it was ever severe, just vaguely annoying - either a mild skin infection caused by the myriad of blackthorns (or hawthorns, is there is a difference?!) scratching at most of my skin, or a heavy bruising or minor break caused by the way I had to grip and push off the rocks with my hand.

But Arran itself was gorgeous, especially at the weekend when it was clear skies and sunny, even if it were a bit cold with the wind. There were times when I'd just stand on top of a hill or at the shoreline and just ... I couldn't hear anything save the wind, there'd be no-one else around, and I'd feel like I was completely alone. And being offline helped my 'presence' too; sometimes I revel in being very much alone.

And then I come back to Glasgow, a city of over 600,000 people, and write/record a podcast. Ha.

I wasn't sure what to do my next podcast episode on; I had a few ideas but most of them required contribs, which I didn't have. But then it occurred to me, by rights I should do another geographic pod, and of my options, Bangladesh seemed to be the simplest to construct, given ... see, when I was writing my original blog post on it I noticed it was a country that was very ... I don't know what the opposite of well-attested is, but it seemed that almost no travel bloggers had ever been there. And furthermore those few that had were mostly, shall we say, 'indifferent, bordering on negative'. Obviously there's a large overlap between travel bloggers in general, and certain ethno-economic backgrounds.

This does open up a question I may have to develop for a future podcast actually – why do we, as travel bloggers, tend to visit the same places, regions, countries, and avoid others, despite those countries having more-or-less the same range of experiences – history, scenery, culture, food, etc. Why is Sri Lanka so popular and yet Bangladesh, which is, relatively speaking, 'just over there', so lacking in bloggers? Like, if you're going to visit India, which is right next door, especially somewhere like Kolkata, it's not like you can say Bangladesh is going to be completely 'unknown' and, to use a word badly, 'hard' to visit. Even neighbouring Myanmar/Burma gets more travel-blogger hits than Bangladesh, and given its political history (and current affairs), and difficulty in exploring independently, that feels weird to me. Similarly, it's like, why do so many people go to, say, Cambodia and so few to Benin or Ghana? Ancient ruins and strong historical legacies, different but accessible food, friendly people, they're no more difficult to get around, nor any more tricky to navigate re languages etc.

But that's for the future. Back to Bangladesh. This lack of travel blogger experience means I don't know very many people who have been there. Which of course made it even harder to source contribs. Which unfortunately makes my podcasting production a whole lot easier. It does mean though that Bangladesh fits very comfortably within the remit of travel 'Beyond The Brochure'.

Now, I don't know what your impressions of Bangladesh are, or even if you have any. As I just alluded to, it's not a country that often features highly on people's "bucket lists"; I have to say I think that's partly because they're not even aware it exists. In terms of actual size it's not a very big country – it's about 148k km², which in American terms puts it between Illinois and Iowa, or in UK terms slightly smaller than the combined area of England and Wales. However in terms of population it's the eighth biggest in the world (around 170 million people). At over 1,000 people per km², it's by far the most densely populated country in the world that isn't a microstate (the largest country or territory in area with a higher population density is Hong Kong, which, in keeping with the USA-themed comparison, is just less than twice the size of Chicago).

It had always been a country 'on' my 'this might be interesting to see' list, and as I say, that few travel bloggers go there just made it more appealing, since I wouldn't be going in with any peer-related expectations. Obviously, as we'll come to shortly, being British means Bangladesh is a country I'm more culturally aware of than if I'd been, say, French or Canadian, but I'd never really actively looked into going, it was just always an 'I ought to at some point'. As you might imagine and expect from me by now, my decision to visit it was an incredibly last-minute one, caused because of, of all things, ticket prices.

I've talked about in previous podcasts (about Solo Travel, and when I revisited Bucket Lists) that I travelled around Philippines with my good friend Laura. The plan had been that I travel from Philippines to Hong Kong with her, and then from there make my way to Nepal (I had the Hong Kong-Nepal ticket already booked). But it turned out the cost of the flight from Philippines to Hong Kong was actually more than an entirely new flight combination from Philippines to Nepal via Bangladesh. So I figured while I was in the area I might as well check out a new country – so on leaving Philippines I booked to spend a week in Bangladesh before heading to Nepal as planned. That I could get a visa on arrival helped my decision too, as opposed to travelling to any of the other countries in the region that I'd never been to. US\$51 is a fair bit of money for a visa, but I've talked about that sort of thing before too (on my Privilege episode) – the extra dollar, btw, was described as the 'visa admin fee'. I've never quite understood that sort of thing, like booking fees on ticket sales, just include it in the price of the ticket, dammit, you have to pay it anyway, you can't avoid not paying it, so it feels weird to see it as an extra. Treat it like VAT, we don't see that as an extra either, just break it down on the paperwork/receipt.

Anyway. As I say I did only spend a week in the country, and only visited the cities of Dhaka and Sylhet. There's a lot I didn't see - the Sundarbans (because I needed to arrange a bit more in advance), Cox's Bazaar (because I'm not a beach person), and the ancient ruins in the west of the country (next time!). But that's still more than most people, and of course the history remains the same regardless of where I visited. And this podcast won't tell you about all the cute cafes to visit. Because I didn't visit any. Because I'm not that sort of travel blogger.

Let's start with a brief and potted history.

The name 'Bangladesh' is a relatively modern one, albeit with ancient provenance. 'Desh' is from the Sanskrit language, meaning 'country', similar to how many countries in English end in 'Land', or in Central Asia end in the Persian 'Stan'. 'Bangla' though ... it's the prior and more accurate form of what the English rendered as 'Bengal', but the origins of this word are disputed and uncertain, although it may refer to an ancient sun god (Bonga), or to the name of a tribe that occupied this area some six thousand years ago and whose language has since been lost.

Bangladesh itself lies in what amounts to a fertile flood plain, where two of the major rivers of, not just Asia but of ancient civilisation meet and flow into the sea - the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. This means you'd've thought the area would have been inhabited since ancient times, while Europe was still five people with clay pots and hunting mammoth. And you'd've thought ... well. While the Indus Valley civilisations on the other side of the Indian peninsula are very much well known and attested, this area is less known about. It appears much of the land later to become Bangladesh was mostly impenetrable jungle. Parts of it still feel like that.

But of course a general lack of knowledge is very much a Western trait. It's believed the region has been inhabited for well over 20,000 years, and given the long prescience of both those rivers, it's unsurprising to learn the area (Pundravardhana) was mentioned in some early sacred Hindu texts.

In the west of the country are the divisions of Rangpur and Rajshahi; here you'll find ancient ruined cities and temples like Paharpur Vihar, Mahasthangarh, and Puthia. These date from around five thousand years ago, and were occupied for several millennia. Although he never quite got this far with his army, there's a local belief that Alexander the Great made contact with the Pundra Kingdom and its power and might were one of the reasons Alexander was forced to turn back.

Subsequent invaders were less fazed, however. Bangladesh's location, not just domestically (situated by the sea at the mouth of two major rivers, surrounded by fertile land), but also internationally (an agriculturally rich area south of the Himalaya, convenient for a stopover between Persia and China) made it a very useful place to set up a base for further development. Two empires in particular made use of it and made it the place it is today.

The first were the Muslims. They began arriving at the start of the 13th century and within 150 years had created the Bengal Sultanate, which lasted for several centuries until being overwhelmed by a secondary Islamic conquest in the form of the Mughal Empire, centred on Delhi in what is now India.

The second were, of course, the British. Because we interfered everywhere. Indeed the area around Bangladesh was the first part of what we later called 'the subcontinent' to fall under British control, courtesy of the victory of the British East India Company's victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757. Before our arrival, what we now know as Bangladesh was quite a prosperous and appealing place. I wonder what happened next.

Anyway. One of the long-standing problems under British rule was the fact that centuries of Islamic control and influence had made the Bengal part of British India feel very different, culturally and socially, to the majority of the rest of the dominion. And since the government was based in the Hindu heartlands, this led to complaints of favouritism and domination by the Hindus over the Muslims. Lord Curzon partitioned the state of Bengal in 1905 along ethno-cultural lines, but neither side were entirely happy with the resulting situation. In the years between the two World Wars, when Indian Nationalism began to rise, there equally grew a vibe of 'Muslim Separatism', and the feeling that when (and not if) India gained its independence, the majority Islamic areas should go their own separate way rather than being dominated in a majority Hindu state,

This is indeed what happened in 1947, when British India was partitioned. However, East Bengal, the Muslim majority part of Bengal state that had been partitioned in 1905, wasn't given separate independence, but rather became an exclave of the Islamic-majority western part of British India, obtaining independence under the name of Pakistan (an artificial name, created as an acronym from the regions of the western part of British

India that had a Muslim majority). The main part became known as West Pakistan, whilst the region later known as Bangladesh became known as East Pakistan, I am fully aware there is a lot more nuance to the history than the brief overview I'm giving you, but I'm a travel blogger and a jack-of-all-trades, not a dedicated South Asian Historian, I'm also British and therefore culturally, if not personally, involved and tainted by the whole process. Not that many people are entirely neutral in this whole shabang.

What seems to have happened then (and there is a whole museum in Dhaka about this, which is as neutral and unbiased as you can imagine) is the government in West Pakistan kind of forgot East Pakistan existed. Ethnically and culturally the two parts of Pakistan were different - West Pakistan was Punjabi and Pashtun in culture and language, whilst East Pakistan was almost entirely Bengali. Islam was pretty much their only common ground. Since the government was based in the West, there was a growing feeling in the East that they were seen as a second-class people; all the subsidies and development was given to the West, and the East was left to languor in relative poverty. The tipping point seems to have been a huge cyclone in November 1970 (the Bhola Cyclone) that's regarded as one of the world's deadliest ever natural disasters - around half a million people are believed to have been killed across both Indian and Pakistani Bengal - and the feeling in East Pakistan was that the government, well, didn't care, to be honest. Demands for independence grew, including an almost wipeout of the East Pakistan provincial government by nationalist candidates in December 1970, but the central government in West Pakistan refused to acknowledge this. This led to a unilateral declaration of independence in March 1971, and a protracted civil war.

The impression I have of the Bangladeshi War of Independence is that it was messy and slow for nine months, with West Pakistan conducting military attacks and the Bangladeshi fighting a guerrilla campaign in response, until, for some reason, West Pakistan attacked India at the start of December 1971. Within two weeks, TWO WEEKS, the Pakistanis had surrendered and Bangladesh was the world's newest independent country. The bottom line here seems to be - don't poke India because you will lose, and it'll be embarrassing,

So that's a brief history, but what of my experiences of the country itself? Well, I didn't spend that long in Bangladesh personally, long enough to get a good feel from the places I went but certainly not long enough to explore every geographical facet of the place. It's not big, as stated earlier, but it packs a lot into its small space.

However, it was certainly long enough to pick up quite a few vibes, which I'm going to share with you shortly, so that you're prepared before you go. Now, bear in mind I've never been to India, which is important in context since it meant I didn't really have a reference point. I had been to Sri Lanka, but I don't think those two compare really in terms of culture or ... experience. Sri Lanka is a country with a definable backpacker route, and is used to seeing western tourists, so everything from getting around all the way to interaction with the people you meet is different. It's interesting to note that one of the reasons I've not been to India is because I'm an introvert who travel solo and I don't know if my mental health would cope well with the intensity of Indian culture, society, and environment that I've been exposed to by cultural osmosis. But then I guess I coped with West Africa?

But before I talk about my experiences, here's Ian Packham, an adventurer, travel writer, and after-dinner speaker, who you heard from at the start of the pod. He walked the height of Bangladesh, from the southern to the northern tip, and thus saw the country in a somewhat different way to me.

{Ian M Packham:

I passed through many of the country's most significant regions, from Teknaf in the South which proudly cares for close to a million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar/Burma, Cox's Bazaar and Chittagong, to Dhaka and then across the Brahmaputra to Bogura and the north-west, where the influence of India grows stronger and stronger.

I decided on Bangladesh for this adventure partly for the simple reason it was a distance I could cover on foot in a reasonably short amount of time, but also because it's one of those parts of the world we don't really hear that much about, which always intrigues me and piques my interest. I think that's mainly because Bangladesh is geographically overshadowed by the sheer size of India to the one side, and the problems of Myanmar/Burma on the other.

I suppose my expectations were of a largely rural nation that in many ways is largely isolated from what's going on in the rest of the world, and particularly the West. I was under the impression, from some pre-trip reading, that I wouldn't find many people who spoke English for instance. And while it's certainly true that Bangladesh is rural, I could walk for an entire day without coming across anything larger than a village / hamlet, most of its

jobs are now in its cities' factories rather than its paddy fields. What jarred most with my expectations was that even the smallest of villages seemed to have mains electricity and a school. The country was far more advanced developmentally than many of the places I have visited in Africa, where I've probably put them down on a level playing field mentally. In fact I'd say my view of Bangladesh is probably about ten years out of date, and probably more.

Bangladesh is one of those destinations you explore I think for its ambiance rather than for any specific sights; there's no real equivalent to the Taj Mahal, although there are some impressive sights across the country, spanning both the Mughal and the British periods of rule.

You'll certainly never be short of conversation; despite what I read there are huge numbers of English speakers, always friendly, interested, helpful, and amazed that anyone should want to come to their country.

Whether you end up loving the solitude of the country paths, and the relative chaos of the big cities like Dhaka, which it took me two days to walk across, it's so big, will largely be down to your personal preferences, but there's no doubting that Bangladesh deserves consideration for anyone looking for a destination that's both authentic and filled with 'I wonder what's around that corner' moments.

}

It is incredibly likely your first experience of Bangladesh will be Dhaka. One of the most densely populated cities on Earth. I'd come from Philippines, but specifically from a couple of the islands in Philippines mostly full of backpacker-intensive towns. My last couple of nights were in Coron, on the island of Busuanga, which has a population of just over 70,000. Dhaka ... it's likely the small suburb my hotel was in had a higher population than that, and Coron municipality is only marginally smaller than the urban area of Dhaka, which has over 100x more people. That's not a misprint in my notes.

The biggest effect this brings to the wary and naive traveller is that everywhere you look there are people, there is traffic, and there is pollution. This is not in any way surprising, and it's something you quickly get used to, because you have to, more than anything, but those first few moments, they're going to impress themselves on you. I arrived in the late evening and it still took maybe an hour to get to the hotel from the airport by taxi, a journey that I was later to walk in about 15-20 minutes, simply because of all the traffic.

The most common form of transport in the city seems to be the CNG. This is a small metal box, often green, and is regularly used as the dominant form of taxi. CNG refers to its propulsion system - Compressed Natural Gas - and for those of you used to South-East Asia, think of it as a gas-powered tuk-tuk. Alternatively you can think of it as a mobile fart - they're prone to methane leakage. Not that it smells particularly bad, mind you - the city has more than enough else to block the senses, including red double-decker buses, of the kind that might have ridden the city streets of Sheffield in about 1973. And a lot of cars. And motorbikes, bicycles, rickshaws ... every spare piece of road space is either about to be occupied, or has just been occupied. It's quite amazing there aren't more accidents than there are. It's a strange feeling to be on the road, travelling inside, say, a CNG - you really feel you are genuinely putting your life in someone else's hands.

But while you might think this leads to traffic jams, the truth is the CNG is small enough to be able to slip between lanes and generally be like a fly in a field of flowers. The only thing they stop for, and then only grudgingly, are the crowds of people who flock across the roads between the cars because there's no point in waiting for the traffic lights, and in any case most of the traffic is stopped as it has nowhere to go.

I took the bus from Dhaka to Sylhet. It's 235km, and the bus journey took 7 hours - average speed 33 and a half kph, or 21mph. If that seems slow, note that the first hour and a half was simply getting out of Dhaka. As a side note, on the way back, I flew. 45 minutes, £35, dreadful journey btw, turbulence the whole way and at no point did I have visibility out the window, but still, less annoying than the bus,

Incidentally, there is a suburban rail network in Dhaka. It is as crowded as you expect. People use the railway lines as footpaths.

And it is a lot of people. A lot of words to describe movements of people have become loaded in political metaphor, but this is, I mean, it's fairly difficult to find a spot in Dhaka that doesn't have more people walking past it in an hour than you'd see in a day in your average home town. And I live in Glasgow.

What passes for pavements are filled with people walking, at least when there aren't stalls in the way. At every major road junction or roundabout you have to weave your way past CNG and rickshaw drivers touting for business, people sat behind wooden counters selling all manner of clothes and accessories, and simply people walking past on their way somewhere equally as crowded.

And the buses that pass by, even in the suburbs, are jammed with people – to the extent that would-be commuters literally push each other onto the bus as it passes – the buses rarely come to a complete standstill at bus stops, instead crawl inexorably to their destination in the traffic, so sometimes even the very definition of a bus stop is called into question.

Crossing the roads is a feat best done at 2am. At various points though there are footbridges, identifiable as a seething mass of people narrowing into the same space. You don't so much as climb the stairs as are 'guided' up them in the same way a twig is moved by a stream.

Obviously this leads to a lot of things. Be prepared for a constant level of noise, for one thing. There's quiet spots in Bangladesh, don't get me wrong, and I'll talk about that later, but your entry point will almost certainly be Dhaka, and Dhaka is not one of them. The noise of vehicles. The noise of horns of vehicles. The noise of people shouting over the noise of horns blared over the noise of vehicles. A lot of people. The word cacophony is oft misused but here I think it's very apt. You will go back to Manhattan, to Piccadilly Circus, and go 'oh, it's great to be somewhere quiet'. And your friends will look at you as if you need some kind of intervention.

The other manifestation of course is air quality, Now, there's a website that tracks air quality, waqi.info. It's a site dismissed as 'western propaganda' in China, but then, they would, I guess. The website calculates a score based on the pollutants recorded in the air, and it's real-time. Values above 100 are 'unhealthy for some', over 150 is 'unhealthy for all', and over 200 is 'getting dangerous'. As I type and record this pod, Dhaka is in the high 150s. In comparison, my part of Glasgow has a figure of 29.

To be fair to Bangladesh, the chest infection I came back home with, and which stopped me from going to Japan three weeks later, only presented itself after a couple of days in Kathmandu in Nepal, surprisingly an equally polluted city, but I'm sure my experiences in Dhaka didn't help.

I'm not saying it's not a place for an introvert; it's not that people are always in your face talking to you. Rather, the sheer number of people around you at any given point means you will have issues with personal space; at least in the cities it's hard to find a place to be yourself.

Although sometimes your very presence will raise a few eyebrows, leading to one very common and regularly heard phrase, which you will hear within your first hour. And it's not just me; the few people I know on Travel Twitter who have been to Bangladesh have said exactly the same thing.

"Can I have a selfie?"

Oh my god.

So there I am, minding my own business, taking pictures in a major square in Sylhet lined with typical architecture, when I hear a voice call to me from behind., I turn around and there's three young men coming towards me. Now, at this point, your mind races with all manner of queries and worries, but before I can react they ask the one question that I'd been hearing a lot throughout the whole week: "Can we have a selfie with you?"

It turns out that these three are students from the local college, and curious about what I was doing visiting Bangladesh. But what I found in my time in the country is that, rather than talking to me first and then asking about selfies as a parting shot, their opening gambit was to request a selfie and then they'd ask me where I was from etc.

I found it interesting that there seemed to be no particular demographic around this either; in my time in the country I was approached for selfies by children, students, elderly women, family groups, and tour parties. Pretty much everyone who is anyone wanted to have their picture taken with me.

I don't know if it was because I was obviously a foreigner and they were intrigued by my presence, but while not as prevalent as Hong Kong (where pretty much everyone was taking a selfie), certainly I saw many Bangladeshi

taking pictures of themselves so I guess it's a natural part of the culture regardless of my presence. Although having a tall hairy white man in their pictures is presumably good for bragging rights. Shame I'm not the most photogenic of people!

One of the most excessive instances was in the Ratargul Swamp Forest, which I'll talk more about later, but while I was there I encountered an entire family, at least three generations, who were touring the area just as I was. They had almost no grasp of English, but they knew the word 'selfie'. I ended up having what amounted to ... I think the best Western description is the photos taken at a wedding when you're one of the closely important participants, say the Best Man or the Sister of The Bride. Not the centre of attention, but equally, too important to not miss out on every, single, shot. I must be in about twelve photos that the family took, with different arrangements of people, in front of different trees, with different poses. I do wonder if, in the years to come, that family will look at those photos and go 'oh yes, this is the time we met this White Man in Ratargul. No idea what he was doing there, or why he wasn't wearing shoes'.

It actually happened a couple of times elsewhere even in Ratargul, but that was just the most excessive. A woman with who I assume was her grandmother grabbed me for about four or five pics in a lookout tower, for instance. But it was a constant theme on my visit to Bangladesh,

While some of them were just interested in the selfie, some, like the students in Sylhet, used the selfie as a 'way in' to having a longer conversation with me. Now, paranoid, suspicious, me is always wary of this sort of thing as it usually ends up with them trying to sell me something or otherwise want some money off me. But I have to say, this simply didn't happen with Bangladesh; people were genuinely purely curious about me. So, for instance, while walking along one of the streets in Sylhet, a Muslim woman, completely covered in the burqa, came up to me and asked if she could just chat with me. We didn't chat long, just a few minutes, but her purpose was because she very rarely saw westerners around Sylhet, she specifically wanted to take some time to talk to a native English speaker, and to practice her English.

Also in Sylhet a chap on a moto-scooter saw me walking up the road and insisted on giving me a lift - we ended up gliding around one of the tea plantations, he gave me a sample of the local illicit moonshine, then dropped me back off where he'd picked me up, no questions asked. It was strangely liberating.

For the record, the illicit moonshine was particularly foul. It was smooth, tasted faintly of tea, slightly roasted, and ... didn't lend itself well to a second shot. It looked like water. It went down like rocket fuel.

Ah, and, now, this is something to remember, and bear in mind its history and, indeed, its reason for existence. Bangladesh is 90% Islamic. Alcohol is not something that's high on list of cultural priorities here. That said, at one point on the bus from Dhaka to Sylhet I saw a huge billboard advert for Tiger beer. I never found anywhere that actually sold it, but I guess partly that was because I never asked. Because it's Tiger, and therefore merely a mass-produced dodgy lager. I don't imagine the Bangladeshi craft beer market is terribly big, but I didn't go looking for it in any case, because, hey, cultural sensitivities. Indeed, it may not surprise you to know that I didn't drink any alcohol in my time in the country. Rather, all my drinks were water, juice, or the occasional lassi - a yoghurt-based drink very popular in South Asia. And very useful to soothe the digestive system in the face of the excessive spice from the food.

The main drink in the country is tea, and specifically, black tea. Across the border is the Indian state of Assam which is of course world-famous for tea, and the tea-growing area stretches across the border. Because of course when tea was first mass-produced in the area, it was all part of the same, er, British Empire. Bangladesh is recorded as being the 10th largest producer of tea in the world, accounting for maybe 3% of global tea production. The majority of this production is found in the Northeast of the country; Sylhet and nearby towns (like Sreemangal) are noted for their extensive tea plantations that surround them (one of them, Lakkatura, apparently covers an area of around 1600 acres - around 900 football pitches). Walking around them is a very popular way to spend a chilled day, partly because they're quite scenic in and of themselves, but also partly I suspect because they provide the same function as large parks do in places like London - a way for the local citizens to get some fresh countryside air without having to wend their way too far out the city.

I was there in a February, which isn't quite tea season - people start picking the tea leaves more towards the end of March - which made the plantation a little quieter than it often is, but that just meant I could admire the scenery more.

Now, I have to say I'm not terribly fond of tea - in fact I find it quite boring. I'll make an exception for concepts like traditional Arabic mint tea, but that's more because of the mint and sugar than for the tea itself.

The way the English in particular tend to drink their tea (weak, a little sugar, more milk than the average dairy) almost offends my tastebuds; a culture built on 'a nice cup of tea and a sit down' hasn't managed to make said cup of tea terribly exciting. I guess that's a shame given the myriad of varieties there are out there, but most people don't even keep Lapsang Suchong in their kitchen cupboards never mind anything else more flavoursome and niche. I'm sure there's an Elliott Simpson joke about liking tea the same as their lovers: strong, sweet, and nowhere near their trousers. But that would be rude. No milk today. Also rude. Full Swap Radio listeners know what I'm on about ...

That said, of course during my time in Sylhet I had to have a couple of glasses. Of tea, I mean. It was hard to avoid, to be honest, given that it's available almost everywhere; there are stalls on the street selling it for the equivalent of a few pence. My aversion to milk raised a few eyebrows there too, but hey we're all different.

I did not have the notorious seven-layered tea. Because no-one needs that level of cheese in their life.

Now, I've mentioned that milky tea is something that connects Bangladeshi and British culture. Another thing is a particular style of cuisine, what we know in the UK as 'curry', even if it's never seen so much as a lurid glance across the canteen at a curry leaf.

The curry is a staple of UK cuisine. While the first recorded Indian restaurant in the UK (in Westminster, so beyond the scope of my London podcasts) opened in 1810, it didn't last very long (only a year or so), presumably because Georgian England's tastebuds hadn't yet become aligned to South Asian flavours. It wasn't until the post-war (and by that I mean World War Two, not the Napoleonic War) immigration boom that Indian restaurants became a fixture on the UK high streets, and their expansion was quick and vast. Not that the vast majority of Indian restaurants serve traditional South Asian cuisine; long-considered the most popular 'curry' style, chicken tikka masala, was believed to have been invented in that most historical centre of the British Raj, er, Glasgow.

The other inauthentic (at least in terms of international borders) thing about Indian restaurants in the UK is their origin. There's an oft-quoted statistic that seems to have come from research in the 1980s, but I've never found anything to *dis*-prove this, that suggests some 90-95% of all so-called 'Indian' restaurants are run by people of Bangladeshi origin. Breaking this down further, it's believed that a similar proportion of these (90-95%) are Bangladeshi specifically from the Sylhet area. I don't have any reason to dispute this either, and it's interesting to note as an anecdote that the chap who ran the hotel I stayed in in Sylhet used to run a restaurant in Gloucester (the nearest significant place to where my uncle lives), not far from the cathedral.

As an aside, while it's unclear if it was ever an official twinning arrangement, there have certainly been strong cultural and political links between Sylhet and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, famous of course for the area of Brick Lane, generally considered the best place in London to get an Indian curry. Even if it's not a curry and definitely not Indian.

Anyway.

The other thing to bear in mind in Bangladesh is the way to eat. Cutlery is optional; rather, even in fairly fancy restaurants, you take your naan or chapatti in your (right!) hand, scoop up the curry with it, and eat. It's remarkably liberating to eat with your fingers in public. Also, given that much of the food is 'saucy' (not in a 1970s seaside postcard way; remember, Islamic culture doesn't lend itself to a Carry-On movie), it's far easier to use hands and bread than a knife and fork. Especially with the terribly bony fish that seem to be popular here.

Just remember, you're unlikely to get a lager with that curry. Not that I was ever fond of lager, but in any case if you need something to soothe the spice you're not used to because you're a white man from Mansfield, milky drinks work far better than watery ones, because their thickness and creaminess soothes the spice in the throat. Hence the lassi. Common across South Asia, lassi is a kind of flavoured yoghurt drink. While often served 'plain' (relatively unflavoured, but mixed with salty water), it's often flavoured with mild spices or flowery flavours, or with sweet fruit. I'm particularly fond of mango lassi, but then I do like a good mango.

Anyway. Back to the vibe that Bangladesh is very densely populated, crowded, and noisy. And it is, as I've talked about at length. But that's not to say the entire country should be painted in that way, of course. For its size it does have a lot of wide open spaces, places where you can largely escape and be yourself. Well, within reason of course - even (or possibly especially) when you're deep in the forest and quite a CNG ride from anywhere, there will always be people asking you for a selfie. But this aside ... two of the most famous places are Cox's Bazaar and the Sundarbans. I didn't go to either, for the record, but that's by the by.

The Sundarbans, specifically Sundarbans West, South, and East, is a series of protected mangrove forests and wildlife sanctuaries in the south-west of the country - the Sundarban National Park is the equivalent area across the border in India. The name is believed to come from the Bengali word for the types of tree growing here. They're deemed to be a good place to spot the sadly rare Bengal Tiger, one of the largest and deemed ferocious wild cats still in existence, but even if you don't (and there's a fair chance they'll spot you first - be very careful and go with a guide; this is not a place for solo explorers, especially if you're a White Man whose only prior experience of fierce creatures is a badger in Shropshire), there's still an awful lot of fascinating wildlife to be seen - both in the swampy waters and flying in the air overhead. Given the Sundarbans are one of the major draws to the country, there's any number of tours offered headed this way; the main reason I didn't was because most of them required more of a notice period than I was able to give - one of the maleficits of last-minute travel.

Cox's Bazaar (named after the market named after a British diplomat in the late 1700s who rehabilitated a large number of refugees) is a city in the far south-east of the country, near the border with Burma/Myanmar, that country with two names, both of which have a lot of political baggage. I've never been there either, even if in many ways it's a country which fits well with my travel brand, partly for that very reason. But back to Bangladesh. Cox's Bazaar's main draw is its beach, which, let's be honest, you know I'm not a beachy sort of person, but at 150km in length, it's considered the longest unbroken seaside beach in the world. I'd imagine it'd get a bit boring after a couple of miles, because it's, you know, a beach, but that sort of thing is popular for a lot of people. If that's not enough for you, the city's also located near another National Park (Himchari) with rainforests, waterfalls, and allegedly the possibility to spot Asian Elephants, although I suspect your chances of this are less than those of spotting the Bengal Tiger.

As I've said, too, you can lose yourself in the tea plantations in the east of the country, where you can walk around and feel like you're in a completely different place, far from the madding crowd. Other similar spots, with rolling hills, rivers, waterfalls, and picturesque temples which make good hiking country include the region around the town of Jaflong, near the Indian border, and, in the far SouthEast, beyond Cox's Bazaar, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, with points as high as 900m; a far cry from the flat, flooding, plains of the centre of the country. Just be mindful of the local situation there - when I was growing up, this part of Bangladesh often appeared with regularity on the British Foreign Office Yellow List. Probably because someone had got shot four years earlier and they just assumed nothing had changed ...

One place I did have a wander in though was the swamp forest at Ratargul, a little way north of Sylhet, beyond the airport. It's a simple tuk-tuk ride from town, and it drops you off at a small wharf from where you can hire a boat and oarsman (often a teenager) who'll sail you out for an hour or two on the water. It's a really nice woodland, with gentle rivers wandering through; very peaceful and serene, save the boats of locals who all want the obligatory selfies with you as you're the amazing foreigner. In one part of the waterway is a lookout tower, from the top of which you can look out across the whole wilderness. Otherwise it's a case of riding the ... I guess you'd call them canoes ... on the water and past the trees, before occasionally making landfall and wandering on foot between the trees. Everything, including the water, is green.

The swamp forest, one of the few freshwater swamp forests in the world incidentally, is around 13 and a half square kilometres in area; slightly smaller than the London Borough of Islington. It apparently has a similar feel to Sundarban, albeit considerably smaller (and without the tigers - the most aggressive animal I encountered there was the wasp), and again the name comes from the Bengali word for one of the types of tree located within it. It's also therefore far easier to arrange a visit; you can pretty much turn up and go.

What else. Hmm, so. I am sure some people listening to this this will be thinking 'hm, what about money? I don't know if I trust the banking system or the currency; let's just take large amounts of American dollars and change it as we go'.

This is A Bad Idea.

Ignoring the fact that if you qualify for a visa-on-arrival that ideally would be paid in US\$, and ignoring that the Bangladeshi Taka isn't a currency widely changeable in other countries, my personal experience is that relying on large amounts of foreign currency isn't necessarily useful. Some hotels will allow payment in US\$ (at a slightly unfavourable rate, natch), but in general, the Taka is king. And cash, rather than card, is the way to go. If you're trying to pay your teenage guide through the Ratargul Swamp forest, waving a small plastic card in front of them will only be met with derision, and rightly so.

The best way, the most convenient way, the easiest way, to get Taka is to withdraw it from ATMs. There are ATMs everywhere in the cities, usually associated with banks. Indeed there are far more ATMs than banks; many signposts for banks actually direct you to ATMs, hidden behind doors, often with security guards outside guarding it. Withdrawing money from ATMs in Bangladesh is very easy and probably very safe.

Changing money, however....

Finding a bank with counter staff, as opposed to a simple ATM, is hard enough. Then, when you walk in, you find that either they don't offer money changing facilities, or if they do it's purely for trade or import/export purposes, rather than for the general public. Money exchange offices are almost non-existent (I didn't see any in my entire time in the country).

I did manage to change money in Dhaka, but the circumstances were quite ... shall we say, oblique. I went into one bank and, despite the value of currencies being displayed on an electronic board, they said nooooo we can't change money here, that's just for trade. I asked where I could change money and they told me there was an exchange office about 5 mins walk away in a shopping centre.

The shopping centre was nearer 15 mins walk away but that's by the by. It was a small mall called the Eastern Plaza, consisting of five floors, and where each floor seemed to be dedicated to a specific good. For example, one floor was entirely made up of stalls selling fabrics, one full of gold/jewellery shops, and the top floor was electronics/mobile phones. As an aside, this seems to be quite common in Dhaka. I walked down one street with nothing but tile shops/ceramics, and another that was nothing but pet stores, one after another.

Anyway, I wandered around all five floors but couldn't find anything approximating a money exchange. I had to go back to the ground floor and ask security, who told me it was on the fifth floor. Back up I went, but didn't see it. I did, however, find another bank, at the near end of the floor, so figured this is where they meant.

Apparently not. They couldn't do it but said there was an exchanger, and it was on the 6th floor...

... It turned out at the back end of the mall there's an unmarked staircase down a side passage. It looked for all the world like a maintenance staircase or staff passageway, with lockable gates on it - the other floors were all accessible via centrally-located escalators. So up I go.

... it led into a mosque ?!

This, naturally, confused me, but a couple of people on the stairs assured me that yes, there's a money exchanger here, in the passageways behind the mosque. However I'd have to wait about ten minutes as he was currently in the mosque at prayer.

A few minutes later and he did indeed come out, and was more than happy to exchange me some money - he even gave me a better rate than I was expecting. So, a little tip for you - if you need to change money in Bangladesh, find a mosque. Even if it means going to the sixth floor of a five-storey shopping mall.

Or, you know, just use one of the 7 ATMs I'd passed en route to the plaza ...

Anyway. For a country that's not very well attested amongst travel bloggers, the impressions of Bangladesh I had in my week there were that it was an incredibly interesting and rewarding country to visit, and I'll surely be back - there's so much stuff I didn't get to see. I suspect it might also be interesting to compare/contrast with areas just over the Indian border - so I think that's my plan for, I don't know, 2024 or something!

{standard end jingle}

Well that's about all for this episode. Join me next time when I take another trip Beyond The Brochure. Until then, learn to love taking selfies, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure was written, presented, edited, and produced in the Glasgow studio by The Barefoot Backpacker. Music in this episode was “Walking Barefoot On Grass (Bonus)” by Kai Engel, which is available via the Free Music Archive, and used under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Previous episodes will be available on your podcast service of choice, or alternatively on my website: barefoot-backpacker.com. If you want to contact me, I live on Twitter @rtwbarefoot, or you can e-mail me at info@barefoot-backpacker.com.

*The podcast has a Facebook Group : [travel.tales.beyond.brochure](https://www.facebook.com/travel.tales.beyond.brochure)
And I have a Patreon, for access to rare extra content: patreon.com/traveltalesbeyondbrochurepod*

Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}