

Dhaka Division



Rub your eyes and blink. You are finally free of the last of the crazy Dhaka traffic jams and in front of you stretches a rural wonderland. This large district, comprising of some 25,000 villages and hardly any towns, is the most densely populated area of Bangladesh and epitomises the diversity of this surprising country.

While there are dappled forests, great rivers and hilly panoramas, much of the region is given over to radiant rice paddies, filling your vision with more hues of green than you ever knew existed. It's this farming soul, where life revolves around the gentle clip-clop of an ox and cart and the slow rotation of the seasons, that is, for the adventurous tourist, the appeal of this little visited region. It's the sort of place where brief encounters turn into solid friendships and a person can fall in love with a much maligned nation. This is the reason you came to Bangladesh, so dive right in.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Pace the streets of a city of gold in regal **Sonargaon** (opposite)
- Dance with cobras, get lovey-dovey with pythons and be spellbound by the magical residents of **Ghuradia** (p73)
- Munch on Monad, search for 99 elephants disguised as policemen and slither your hips like a pole dancer in **Muktagacha** (p77)
- Monkey around spotting the spotted deer in the patchy forests of **Madhupur National Park** (p77)



SONARGAON

A great day trip from Dhaka (about 23km) is an excursion to Sonargaon (sometimes known as Old Sonargaon), the country's first capital. Combining countryside, culture, archaeology, adventure and friendship in one tidy bundle, the village is an ideal way to experience all the best of Bangladesh in one easy step.

Except for some mosques, a bridge, a few tombs and stupas (Buddhist monuments), and some indistinguishable mounds (most of which are found around the small modern village of Mograpara), nothing much remains of the original city of Sonargaon. For most people, enchanting Painam Nagar (p72) is the real jewel.

Unfortunately the government's archaeological department has done precious little to preserve the buildings of Sonargaon and, on the rare days that work is undertaken, the results are normally totally out of keeping with the surrounding buildings. Some of the poorer residents reportedly sell the bricks from ramshackle buildings to be broken into gravel for construction work. Since

Independence, only Goaldi Mosque, a pre-Mughal bridge and a single rajbari (landowner's palace) called Sadarbari (now housing a folk-art museum) have been restored.

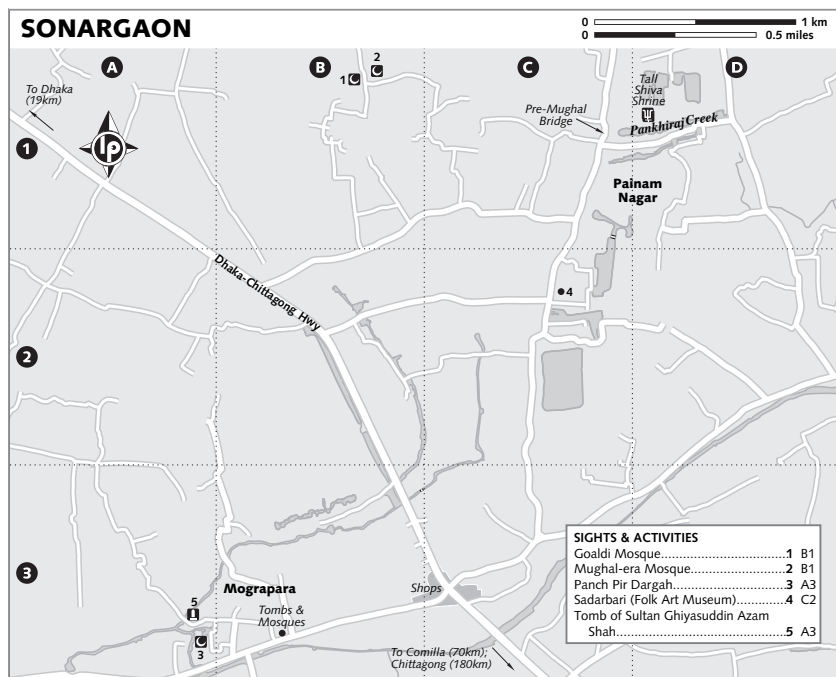
Sights & Activities

MOGRAPARA

A thriving village located on the Dhaka–Chittagong Hwy, Mograpara claims most of the remains of the old capital, including the **Tomb of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah** (the oldest surviving Muslim monument in Bangladesh) and the **Panch Pir Dargah**. Most of these are 1km or 2km west of Mograpara. These monuments aren't very impressive and most visitors, believing only Painam Nagar to be Old Sonargaon, don't even know they exist.

SADARBARI (FOLK-ART MUSEUM)

Built in 1901, this stunning rajbari is an appropriate building for a **folk-art museum** (admission Tk 10; ☎ 9am–5pm, Fri–Wed). The building has two façades. The one facing the street, with steps leading down to the water and life-size English horsemen in stucco on either side, is one of



the most picturesque in Bangladesh. The other, at the museum's entrance, is profusely embellished with a mosaic of blue and white tiles, and has something of an Andalusian look to it.

Inside, the unadorned rooms are stuffed full of folk art and handicrafts, but everything is very poorly labelled and badly displayed. Around the back of the rajbari, and on the opposite side of the lake, is a new building containing another museum of folk-art objects. This one is much better organised and laid out.

For most people though, the highlight of a visit are the beautiful water-soaked gardens where trees, lawns and ponds have come together in a close impression of heaven. Bird-watchers should bring some binoculars because the trees and bushes are full of different kingfisher species. Relaxed Bangladeshis from the city come here for some fresh air on Friday.

GOALDI MOSQUE

Built in 1519, the graceful, single-domed **Goldi Mosque** is the most impressive of the few extant monuments of the old capital city, and a good example of pre-Mughal architecture.

The mosque 50m beyond Goaldi, built in 1704 during the Mughal period, is historically less important.

PAINAM NAGAR

The once elegant town of **Painam Nagar** is busy fighting a losing battle with nature, and with every passing year the trees and vines drape themselves a little further over the decaying houses. The result is a delightful ghost-town quality where the buildings appear to hang like exotic fruits from the branches of the trees.

Constructed almost entirely between 1895 and 1905 on a small segment of the ancient capital city, this tiny settlement consists of a single narrow street, lined with around 50 (now dilapidated) mansions built by wealthy Hindu merchants. At the time of Partition, many owners fled to India, leaving their elegant homes in the care of poor tenants, who did nothing to maintain them. Most of the remaining owners pulled out during the anti-Hindu riots of 1964, which led up to the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War. Despite the rot, a few people do continue to live in some of the houses and their bright shades add a technicolour tint to the village.

Getting There & Away

Sonargaon is only 23km from central Dhaka and makes an easy day trip. From Dhaka's Sayedabad bus station, say the buzz word 'Mograpara' (Tk 30, 40 minutes – if the traffic is on your side!). If you ask for Sonargaon, you will likely end up at the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel. Once you're in Mograpara, a short rickshaw ride will get you to the museum and

A GOLDEN TOWN

The ancient capital of Sonargaon (or 'Golden Town' in Hindi) flourished as the region's major inland port and centre of commerce during the pre-Muslim period. By the 13th century it was the Hindu seat of power. With the Muslim invasion and the arrival of the sultan of Elhi in 1280, its importance magnified as the region's de facto Islamic capital. Some 42 years later, the first independent sultan of East Bengal, Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah, officially established his capital in Sonargaon.

For the next 270 years, Sonargaon, known as the 'Seat of the Mighty Majesty', prospered as the capital of East Bengal, and the Muslim rulers minted their money here. Mu Huany, an envoy from the Chinese emperor, visited Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah's splendid court here in 1406. He observed that Sonargaon was a walled city with broad streets, great mausoleums and bazaars where business of all kinds was transacted. In 1558, famous traveller Ralph Fitch noted that it was an important centre for the manufacture and export of *kantha* (traditional indigo-dyed muslin), the finest in all of India. Ancient Egyptian mummies were reportedly wrapped in this *kantha* exported from Bengal.

When the invading Mughals ousted the sultans, they regarded Sonargaon's location along the region's major river as too exposed to Portuguese and Mogh pirates. So in 1608, they moved the capital to Dhaka, thus initiating Sonargaon's long decline into oblivion. Yet its legendary fame for incredibly fine muslin fabric continued undiminished until foreign competition from the British (and their import quotas) ruined the trade.

CENTRE FOR THE REHABILITATION OF THE PARALYSED (CRP)

An inspiring organisation that has been operating since 1979, the **Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed** (CRP; ☎ 771 0464/5; www.crp-bangladesh.com) helps paralysed people develop skills that enable them to become self-sufficient and productive.

In addition to selling fish, fruit, poultry, handicrafts and wheelchairs, CRP's funding is also derived from the guesthouses it runs in the tea gardens of Moulvibazar.

The centre has branches in Gonokbari, Gobindapur, Manikganj and Mirpur, but its headquarters is on the northeastern outskirts of Savar Bazar on the Dhaka–Aricha Hwy, from where you can buy postcards, stationery and other trinkets produced by CRP patients.

Visitors are most welcome at this sprawling complex; various training sessions and workshops are held daily from 8am to 1pm, and from 3pm to 6pm. The centre is closed Thursday afternoon and Friday. Volunteers, both skilled and unskilled, are always required – see the website for details.

other sights. Rickshaw-wallahs will guess what you're there to see.

SAVAR

☎ 06626

A popular day excursion for Dhaka locals is a trip to Savar (*shar-var*). The town, Savar Bazar, is on the Dhaka–Aricha Hwy, 15km north of Gabtali bus station in Dhaka. Tuesday is market day in Savar Bazar, which becomes very animated, especially along the banks of the Bangsi River just west of town.

The main attraction is the historic **National Martyrs' Memorial** (Jatiya Sriti Saudha), which is 8km further along the Dhaka–Aricha Hwy, just off the road. The tapering 50m-high structure is a memorial to the millions who died in the struggle for independence. The beautifully kept grounds contain a number of grassy platforms that cover the mass graves of some of those slaughtered in the Liberation War. This is an important place for Bangladeshis, who wander the grounds with an air of reverence.

If you need to eat, there's a large Parjatan restaurant across the road from the National Martyrs' Memorial. Downstairs the food is fast and cheap; upstairs it's more expensive and tasty. There is a well-marked Chinese restaurant on the main drag in the centre of Savar Bazar.

Buses for Savar (Tk 30, one hour) leave from Gabtali bus station throughout the day. Tell the driver that you want to get off at the memorial.

DHAMRAI

☎ 011

Dhamrai, an excellent side trip from Savar, is little more than a village, but its single main street packs quite a punch. Rotting slowly, and

in the most pleasant of manners, are a dozen or so extravagant century-old houses built by the wealthy Hindu families who once lived here. Today the town continues to be home to a substantial Hindu population and the inhabitants are renowned for their skill in brass work and for their *jamdani* (embroidered muslin or silk) weaving. Most of the finest Rajera buildings are occupied by brass or weaving workshops, and are slowly being restored to their former glory. These workshops are well worth a peek, as the process of making brass objects (often Hindu religious statues) using the lost-wax technique is a fascinating one. The quality of the goods they turn out is generally excellent and, with no pressure or sales pitch whatsoever, it's a good opportunity to browse. One workshop that has received high praise is **Dhamrai Metal Craft** (☎ 832 620).

Saturday, which is market day, is a good time to come for some local colour. The multi-storey Jagannath (chariot), adorned with painted images from Hindu mythology, sits in the centre of town and is paraded down the street during **Rath Jatra**, the festival held here during the full-moon in late June/early July (see p162).

Dhamrai is 5km west of the Savar and 1km north off the Dhaka–Aricha Hwy. Buses between Savar and Dhamrai cost about Tk 5.

Buses to Dhamrai (Tk 35, one hour) leave from Dhaka's Gabtali bus station. A baby taxi will be quicker but costs around Tk 250.

GHURADIA

Are you scared of snakes? If so give Ghuradia a wide berth because it's in this little village on the banks of the Dhaleshwari River (a few kilometres from Savar) that your worst nightmares will come true. There

are slippery serpents everywhere, but don't worry because the human inhabitants of the village are rumoured to have magical powers that allow them to handle deadly cobras without fear. The Badhi river gypsies are famous throughout the region for their skill as snake charmers, but are also employed to remove snakes from houses, and to milk cobras and other venomous snakes (the venom they milk is used in antivenin). The villagers will know what you have come for and there are always a few boxes of snakes lying around. Bidding for a snake-charming show will probably commence at around Tk 1000 but quickly drop to a more sensible Tk 100 to Tk 150. The snakes they use include cobras and much more harmless pythons, as well as various equally harmless water and tree snakes. In actual fact the cobras are also harmless – they've either been defanged or milked of all their venom (though it's probably best not to test this).

Getting to Ghuradia is complicated in your own car and almost impossible on public transport. The best advice is to hire a taxi or rickshaw in Savar as they should know the way. If not, the staff in the Parjatan restaurant opposite the National Martyrs' Memorial (p73) will be able to give you directions. Remember that by visiting you are encouraging the villagers to catch more snakes.

BHAWAL NATIONAL PARK

Located at Rajendrapur, and only one hour north of Dhaka, **Bhawal National Park** (admission per person Tk 6, per car Tk 30, per minibus Tk 50) is where the citizens of the city come to remember what a lungful of fresh countryside air feels like. While it certainly cannot be described as an untouched wilderness, its forest walks, angling and lake boating make it a favourite weekend haunt with the inhabitants of Dhaka. In recent years, the forest department have created a 'silent zone' where music is banned, and have re-introduced peacocks, spotted deer, fishing cats and pythons.

The park is on the Dhaka–Mymensingh Hwy, 38km north of Dhaka. From Mohakhali bus station in Dhaka, buses heading for Mymensingh run right past the well-marked park entrance, on your right. The trip takes at least an hour.

TANGAIL

☎ 0921

Crawling along the traffic- and pollution-clogged road out of Dhaka, it's hard to believe that Tangail has anything of interest except the possibility of a cold drink. Yet in the green fields just behind this scruffy town is a magnificent piece of Bangladeshi artistic heritage – **Atia Mosque**. Built in 1609 by Said Khan Panee, this pretty-in-pink mosque, depicted on the Tk 10 note, blends pre-Mughal elements with imperial Mughal architectural features. It has been diligently restored several times in its long life. Its location, among a rash of trees and fields and beside a deep pond, is sheer visual poetry after the nightmare of the road from Dhaka.

The mosque is located 9km south of Tangail on the tarred road to Nagarpur, and a rickshaw from the town will cost around Tk 100 with waiting time.

Tangail has little in the way of a tourist infrastructure and its proximity to the capital means there is no real reason to stay here. There are some friendly local restaurants on the main street, and more serving similar chicken, fish and mutton dishes at the intersection of Dhaka and Mymensingh Rds.

You will find the **District Forestry Office** (☎ 53524) for Madhupur National Park (p77) on the third floor of the well-marked Water Development Board building, a block north of the post office on Victoria Rd.

Getting There & Away

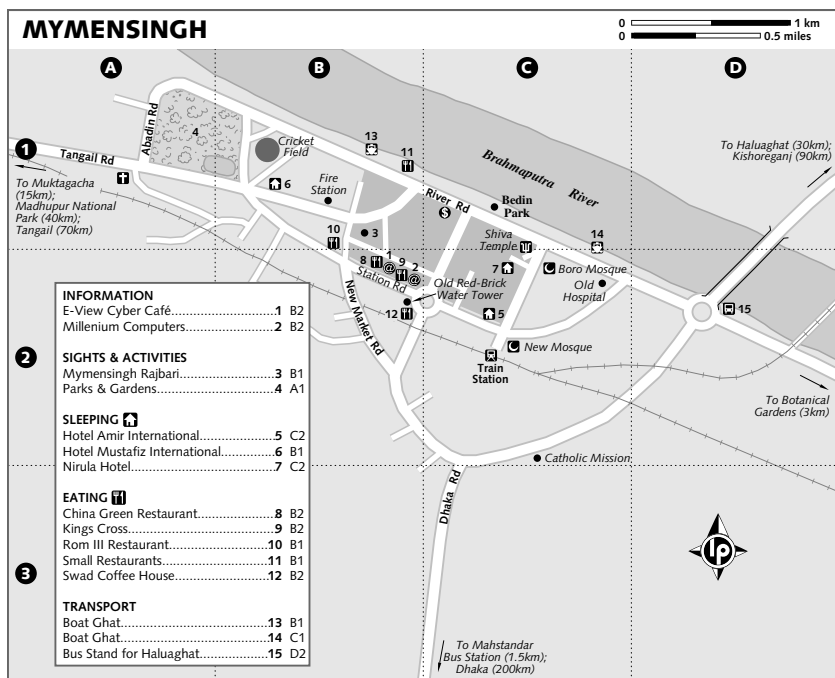
Ordinary buses leave Tangail every 20 minutes or so between 5am and 7pm to Dhaka (Tk 80, 2½ hours) and Mymensingh (Tk 90, 2½ hours). All leave from the main bus station on Mymensingh Rd, 2km north of the intersection with Dhaka Rd.

Buses for Tangail depart from Mohakhali bus station in Dhaka.

MYMENSINGH

☎ 091

Mymensingh presents maybe the most gentle of introductions you can have to the wonderful world of rural Bangladesh, yet the poor old girl is largely ignored by most visitors. In some ways this makes sense. The town is out on a limb and getting from there to almost anywhere else involves backtracking to Dhaka and, secondly, there are no drop-dead tourist attractions that just have to be seen.



Even so, this leafy town, built on the banks of the mighty River Brahmaputra, has a lovely riverside setting that the authorities have been quick to capitalise on. You'll also find one of the most interesting old quarters in the country, whimsical botanical gardens, lots of happy students and a wealth of nearby natural-world attractions. If you're hooked on rickshaws then you'll like Mymensingh – the zillions of rickshaw-wallahs here seem to be in fierce competition to see who can create the most colourfully decorated fleet.

There are some internet cafés on Station Rd. A good one with reliable connections is **Millenium Computers** (Mymensingh Online; 1st fl, Alimun Plaza; per hr Tk 20). **E-View Cyber Café** is further west on the same side of the road.

Sights & Activities

Built between 1905 and 1911, the **Mymensingh Rajbari** is a well-kept building in the middle of the city. It is now occupied by an organisation that trains female teachers, but much of the original structure remains. An ornamental marble fountain with a classical statue of a semi-nude nymph lies just beyond the arched

gateway entrance. Behind the main building is the Jal-Tungi, a small two-storey bathhouse once used as the women's bathing pavilion. You can politely ask the security guard for admittance to the grounds, but it is doubtful whether he will grant you a glimpse of the interior.

Several kilometres east of town, next to the Agriculture and Fisheries College, are the large and peaceful **botanical gardens** (entrance Tk 2; 9am-5pm). Well laid out, and with clear labels pinpointing some of the more interesting plants and trees, it makes an excellent place to relax on a bench with a book. A rickshaw from the town centre will cost in the region of Tk 30.

The original ancient core of the town, located between the train station and the waterfront, is, with its many absorbing **souks**, a fascinating place in which to get lost. Keep an eye open for the gold workshops, muddled away in the mess of streets, where people hammer down minuscule gold pieces found in the riverbed in order to make jewellery. The town has a large Hindu minority and there are several noticeable Hindu shrines in the

old town area. The most obvious is the rotting stone Shiva temple just by the water.

Wind your day up in the **parks** on the waterfront at the western edge of town. This is one of the most enjoyable public spaces in Bangladesh and every evening half the Mymensingh population takes advantage by decamping down here to lull about in the shade of trees and watch multi-coloured boats criss-cross the river. There are several small tea stalls as well as an outdoor café. In the playing fields just behind the parkland, numerous cricket matches add their thunk and whack to proceedings and if you're an architecture buff you'll probably get some joy wandering around the back lanes admiring the glorious old colonial houses. Should you want a closer look at the other side of the river, one of the small wooden boats will happily take you over (Tk 2). From the far bank, set off across this rural oil painting towards one of the many little villages whose inhabitants are likely to be overjoyed to have you around. It's a perfect setting in which to create your own adventure!

Sleeping & Eating

Nirula Hotel (☎ 54285; r Tk 150/250/350) The best budget choice with windowless, but clean, rooms. The Tk 350 rooms differ only from the Tk 250 ones in that they have a TV. They won't be over the moon to let you stay in the Tk 150 room, but that's OK because you probably won't be either. It's in the Chowk Bazar and a little difficult to find.

Hotel Amir International (☎ 54030; 46 Station Rd; s/d Tk 600/800, with air-con Tk 1000/1260; ♿) Set around a central courtyard, the clean rooms here have desks, satellite TV, hot water and even sickly sweet pictures of the English countryside on the walls. The staff are friendly and the English-speaking room boy loves chatting to foreigners about their travels and where he dreams of one day going. The air-con rooms have sit down toilets; those without air-con have squat toilets. It's easily the best value hotel in town.

Hotel Mustafiz International (☎/fax 63870; 6/B Gangadas Guha Rd; s/d Tk 800/1500) On a quiet side street, this new hotel has rooms so big they manage to fit in a sofa or two. The beds and bathrooms are equally large and everything has that newly constructed, immaculate feel, but it's a little overpriced.

There are some nice low-key Bangladeshi restaurants in the numerous side streets off

Station Rd, but for something a little more upmarket try the superb curries at the **Rom III Restaurant**, (Station Rd; mains Tk 100) an eternally popular spot with local students, workers and holidaying Bangladeshis. There are also a couple of Chinese options for lunch and dinner, such as **Kings Cross** (☎ 01715 815399; Station Rd; mains Tk 150) or the slightly more authentically Chinese tasting **China Green Restaurant** (☎ 53331; Station Rd; mains Tk 150).

On the upstairs level of the Press Club complex, just off Station Rd, is the **Swad Coffee House** (☎ 53932; 10am-10pm; mains Tk 25) where teenagers strut and flirt over cheeseburgers and sandwiches.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The main bus terminal is Mahstandar bus station, 3km from the Station Rd Circle. Between 6am and 6pm you can get a bus to a zillion places including Tangail (Tk 80, 2½ hours), Madhupur (Tk 40, 45 minutes), Dhaka (Tk 80, 4½ hours) and Bogra (Tk 140, 4½ hours).

The bus stand for Haluaghat and other destinations on the other side of the Brahmaputra River is, logically, at the bridge. Buses to Haluaghat (Tk 45, 1½ hours) leave regularly between 8am and 7pm.

TRAIN

Mymensingh is no longer really on the way to anywhere since the new railway line over the Bangabandhu Bridge started providing a much faster Dhaka-Rajshahi link. Despite this, travelling by train to Dhaka is certainly a much more relaxing way to go than by the often scary buses. There is one train a day to Dhaka (1st/2nd class Tk 110/80, five hours, departs 4pm).

AROUND MYMENSINGH

To the north, the hill country of the Indian state of Meghalaya beckons in an enticing but unfortunately forbidden way. The area may be divided politically, but culturally it shares a common heritage among the tribal hill people – Mandi (known as Garos across the border in India), Hanjongis and Kochis – all of whom are ethnically distinct from the others around them.

Haluaghat

This is the end of the line, so to speak – the sealed road ends here, but a number of pot-

holed dirt roads take off in various directions for smaller villages along the Indian border. Haluaghat, one of the Mandi tribal centres for the area, is a typical low-slung town less than two hours north of Mymensingh. It is one big market, with vendors selling a variety of rice, dried peppers, and melons in season. Blacksmiths work in small shops next to silversmiths and cloth dealers. You've got to feel for the people of Haluaghat: many must spend their entire lives staring at the hills just over the border, yet never personally get to experience the sensation of climbing a hill! Due to the fact that permits are required to explore anywhere north of Haluaghat, and that the nearby Indian border is closed to foreigners anyway, there is almost no reason to visit this small town.

Buses for Haluaghat (Tk 45, 1½ hours) leave from the bus stand near the Brahmaputra Bridge in Mymensingh.

Muktagacha

The little village of Muktagacha, situated 12km west of Mymensingh on the old Tangail-Dhaka Hwy, has two tourist draws – one cultural and the other dentist-inviting.

The cultural draw is a decaying 300-year-old **rajbari**. Spread over 10 acres, this is a special estate, even in disrepair, bedecked with Corinthian columns, high parapets and floral scrolls in plaster. Inside you'll find a former treasury with the last of 50 safes – a room that the caretaker quaintly describes as the 'finishing room', but is actually a less-quiet execution chamber. The main audience chamber has the remnants of a rotating dance floor, which might well be the precursor of the pole-dancing stage. The Rajeswari temple and the stone temple, believed to be dedicated to Shiva, are two of the finer temples within the complex. Just outside the rajbari are the former stables for the rajbari's 99 elephants. The stables are now occupied by the police, though we don't know if there are 99 of them.

Few locals visit the rajbari, but they do all visit the famous **Gopal Pali Prosida Monda Sweet Shop** (☎ 0902 875383), which makes the best *monda* (grainy, sweetened yogurt cake) in the country. Two hundred years ago the Pal family cooked these delicious sweetmeats for the zamindar (landowner), who liked them so much that he employed the family. When the landowner's family left during Partition, the Pal family opened up shop and have been

in business ever since. This isn't just a shop though, oh no! Start thinking of a strait-laced Bordeaux wine chateau and you're on the right track. The tasting room is a delightful faded-yellow room with hard wooden roof beams and a handful of polished tables and chairs. Once safely installed on said chair, a silver plate with a few tasters of *monda* (Tk 10) will be presented to you for your sensual pleasure. It's open all day, everyday.

Coming from Mymensingh on the Tangail road, take the second road leading northeast into Muktagacha. Go down about three blocks and the shop will be on your right. Look for the lion motif over the door.

Madhupur National Park

Home of the beautiful capped langur monkey, wild boar, barking deer and a galaxy of bird species the Madhupur (*mode-uh-poor*) National Park, covering around 8500 hectares, is one of the last remaining patches of old-growth Sal forest left in the country. In addition to it's abundant wildlife, the park also provides a home to the Mandi tribal peoples (see p78) whom you are almost certain to encounter.

This area was once famous for tigers, unfortunately this was during the days when it was thought that tigers looked much better hung on the wall than in the forest, and they have long since been wiped out. Now, explorations of the forest will likely turn up some rhesus macaque, golden-coloured capped langurs and small herds of gorgeous spotted deer. There are also three species of civets here. Madhupur will turn twitchers twitchy as it's one of the country's finest birding locales. There are numerous species, but serious bird-watchers will be most interested in spotting the dusky owl, the brown fish owl, the spotted eagle owl and the famous brown wood owl, which is a speciality of the forest.

For many years the forest was used and abused by all and sundry, and though this continues, things are starting to improve thanks to government investment. For the moment, despite the presence of marked trails on the forest-office brochures, many locals (and forestry workers), citing bandits, will insist that is far too dangerous for you to explore the forest on your own. While there might be some truth to this, it's more likely that they don't want you stumbling into any of the illegal logging operations taking place here.

MANDI ON THE MOVE

Far into the Madhupur National Park, where there are fewer trees, are some small Mandi settlements. The atmosphere of these enclaves is quite distinct from that of Muslim villages. A matrilineal group, the Mandi (or Garo as they are commonly called by outsiders), may have originally migrated from China. The Mandi language is called Achichik Katha and has no written alphabet. Thanks to the efforts of Christian missionaries, most Mandi are now Christians (though they often maintain aspects of their tribal belief, Sangshareq).

Unfortunately for the Mandi, neighbouring Bengalis are slowly encroaching on their lands and cutting down their forests. Accustomed to having their own space, the Mandi are selling off their lands and heading to more remote areas further north. The rate of deforestation is high and poorly paid forestry officials have few resources to stem it.

However, take solace in the fact that though the official walking trails are still effectively off-limits, there is still a decent amount of wildlife to be found just by walking around the main routes (little more than empty mud trails linking up villages). One excellent day walk is the roundtrip from the forest resthouse to the 'zoo' halfway along the Raspur-Chandar road in the hamlet of Laharina. Don't be put off by the word zoo, as it's more a feeding station for wild animals. The most frequent visitors are the spotted deer and rhesus macaque (who are near enough guaranteed to be hanging around). All up it's a 10km roundtrip walk for which you'll need a guide – ask at the Forest Resthouse.

The **District Forestry Office** (☎ 53524) for Madhupur National Park is in Tangail (p74).

SLEEPING & EATING

Pirgacha Mission (☎ 0171 3003523; Pirgacha village; dm Tk 100) This Christian mission in the small Mandi settlement of Pirgacha has good value dorm beds in traditionally styled mud-walled buildings. Meals are available at very specific times (don't be late!) with advance notice. The complex is run by an elderly American missionary, Father Homerich, who has been here forever and is quite a character.

Forest Resthouse (book through Tangail District Forestry Office ☎ 53524; house Tk 3300) This is a real countryside bolt-hole and a gem of a place to stay. The colonial era bungalow is well-maintained

and has large verandas overlooking the forest, a couple of bedrooms (room for four people) and a pleasant sitting room. There are no organised eating options but someone in the nearby village will conjure meals up for you. If you arrive without pre-booking then you'll need to find the caretaker (rarely a problem) who'll sort everything out for you.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are frequent buses between Mymensingh and Tangail; take a bus to Pocheesh Mile (Tk 40) which is a little way before Madhupur, and from there hop on the back of a wooden goods rickshaw (Tk 50) to Pirgacha village. The Forest Resthouse is on the same road but a couple of kilometres before the village.

Dhanbari Nawab Palace

Some 15km north of the town of Madhupur is the old **Dhanbari Nawab Palace**. It was originally owned by a Hindu, Dhanwar Khan, but it fell into the hands of Muslims, which explains the presence of a mosque.

The interior of the elegant three-domed mosque, renovated in 1901, is marvellous – the inner walls are covered from floor to ceiling with mural decorations made from broken china pieces.

To get here from the town of Madhupur, take the tarred road north towards Jamalpur and after about 15km you'll see the palace on your right, just off the highway.

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