

Destination Bangladesh

In late 2007 a rumbling occurred deep in the tropical waters of the Bay of Bengal. Within hours of Cyclone Sidr smashing into southwest Bangladesh, the world's media and aid organisations were on the move and Bangladesh was about to find herself wrenched back out of obscurity and once again presented to the global community as a classic 'basket case' (as Henry Kissinger once described the country) of disaster. The pictures and stories that emerged from Bangladesh at that time portrayed an entire nation on its knees, but this was only a half-truth for within hours of the storm hitting, the majority of the country was back on its feet and operational.

This wasn't the first time that Bangladesh had been dismissed as a no-hope nation, and it probably won't be the last. But no matter what the opinion of the wider world is, this dynamic country proudly considers itself to be an active participant in an increasingly global community. In defiance of its stuttering development and the weight of historical tragedy that it bears, it is a nation charged with perseverance and promise, and one from which we could all learn a thing or two. For the great irony is that while images of devastation were beamed nightly into Western living rooms and the talk was of an unfolding humanitarian disaster, nobody bothered to say that Bangladesh could make good news. In the years preceding Cyclone Sidr, the country had been quietly doing something considered nearly impossible in richer Western countries – banning all petrol and diesel vehicles from the major conurbations (and, if things go to plan, the entire nation) and replacing them with cleaner alternatives. If striving for cleaner air isn't enough, they've also banned plastic bags and created a flurry of national parks and protected areas.

The same holds true for the country's tourism profile. The majority of the world considers Bangladesh to be a frying pan–flat country. Yet within this flat framework are primeval swamps full of man-eating tigers, the unseen relics of long-forgotten Buddhist kingdoms, lush and lurid tea plantations, tribal groups with Burmese faces, glorious beaches that stretch for eternity, freshwater dolphins and deep-water whales, and some of the most open-hearted people you will ever have the honour to meet. This is a country where genuine adventure is not just a possibility but a certainty. You can chug down mile-wide, slug-brown rivers on a 19th-century riverboat, fish with otters, and hunt for the world's deadliest honey. All this in a country whose loftiest peak is as tall as the highest mountain in Scotland.

It just goes to show how much the world has to learn about the trendsetting, breathtaking and hard-working country that is Bangladesh.

FAST FACTS

Population:	150 million
Percentage of the population living below the poverty line:	45%
Percentage of the population living on less than US\$1 per day:	30%
GDP per capita:	US\$1400
Life expectancy at birth:	63.21 years
Female adult literacy rate (over 15 years old):	31.8%
Male adult literacy rate (over 15 years old):	53.9%
Year women received the right to vote:	1972

Getting Started

Bangladesh is designed for the traveller who revels in genuine adventure. There is little here that can be described as organised, comfortable or reliable, and the backpacker scene of next-door India is completely unheard of. The fact that there are so few tourists in Bangladesh means that you won't have to contend with crowds at hotspots or with booked-out accommodation, but it also means that the going can be rough.

WHEN TO GO

Bangladesh has three main seasons: the monsoonal season (wet season) from late May to early October; the cool season from mid-October to the end of February; and the hot season from March to mid-May.

Between October and February is the best time to go: skies are blue, days are sunny and the weather is dry, with daytime temperatures averaging 24°C. By April the temperature rises to around 40°C, the humidity can be intolerable and hailstorms aren't uncommon. On average, Bangladesh is hit by one major cyclone every three years. The worst times for these are May and June, and October and November.

The only festival that may really inconvenience you is Ramadan. During this month-long period of fasting, getting food (especially in small towns) can be difficult. Some budget hotels stop operating altogether.

COSTS & MONEY

Whatever budget you're travelling on, you can be certain that you'll get more for your money in Bangladesh than just about anywhere else on earth. If you're the type of traveller who sees a cockroach-infested room as just a place to sleep, then you'll enjoy Bangladesh. For as little as Tk 60 you can have a room all to yourself, for Tk 30 you can get an enormous meal and for around Tk 5 you can buy a street snack. A backpacker looking to stretch the pennies can easily get by on US\$6 a day or less. At the 'you only live once' end of the spectrum, you can pay a couple of hundred US dollars for a lavish room, and buy a meal of the same quality and for the same price that you would expect at home (though travel at this end of the scale is only really feasible in Dhaka and Chittagong).

See Climate Charts (p159) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Given that the safety situation in parts of Bangladesh is particularly subject to change, don't leave home without checking some reputable travel advisories. Although you can buy almost anything if you know where to find it, there are a couple of things you might want to bring:

- Loose-fitting, modest clothes
- Earplugs for inconceivably loud bus rides and neighbouring passengers
- Sunglasses for sun and stare protection
- Glasses in case contact lenses become irritated by the pollution
- Torch (flashlight) for power failures
- Appropriate visa (p167) and a passport valid for six months after you intend to leave Bangladesh
- A good book or two
- An open mind

Most people, even those who are confirmed budget travellers elsewhere, travel on a midrange budget in Bangladesh. For between Tk 400 and Tk 1000 a night you will be able to find a nice place to stay with all the necessary amenities. A Tk 120 meal is large and tasty. In the way of transportation, there is a range of classes on trains and boats, and different types of buses, which offers enormous flexibility when weighing up value and comfort. A couple staying together in good quality hotels, travelling on 1st-class train carriages and eating in decent restaurants should budget about US\$15 each a day.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Budding writers will be happy to hear that there is very little travel literature on Bangladesh published in the West. However, there is a growing range of books that will give the traveller an insight into the people and culture.

Monica Ali's best-selling *Brick Lane* (2003) has brought Bangladesh to the world. In this beautifully written novel, set in London and Bangladesh, the trials and tribulations of its multi-dimensional characters reveal the complexity of both Bangladeshi culture and human nature. It's recently been given the full Hollywood makeover and turned into a major film.

The Bangladeshi government should make it illegal to come here and not have *Songs at the Rivers Edge* (1991) by Katy Gardner in your luggage. The story of a year spent living in a small village in the Sylhet region, it's more than a memoir, and answers some of the many questions regarding village life throughout South Asia.

A *Golden Age* (2007) by Tahmima Anam is a superb debut novel of love, betrayal and family loyalties, set against the backdrop of the War of Independence.

If you're caught reading *Lajja* (Shame; 1993) by Taslima Nasrin in Bangladesh (where the book is banned) you're unlikely to make many friends. When first published this half novel/half political treaty earned its outspoken feminist author a *fatwa*. It's essential predeparture reading, but is unfortunately a little hard to find. See also boxed text, p30.

Shame (2007) by Jasvinder Sanghera is the true story of one woman's struggle to break away from Asian tradition and live her life in the UK. The issues raised by this book may make you think about your opinion on both Asian culture and immigration to the West. It is a gripping read.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Tourism in Bangladesh is so little established that there are currently very few 'eco' options in the classic sense of environmentally sustainable hotels and restaurants. Instead, responsible travel in Bangladesh is more about the way you behave and think, and your interactions with local people. You might be the only foreign tourist that many Bangladeshis will see all year and therefore your every movement will be judged. In Bangladesh it's essential to interact with the local people: drink cha with them, share meals with them and answer their questions, however tiring they become, and in return ask your own. Be aware that the tribal groups living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (p129) and elsewhere are suffering heavily from government policies of marginalisation. By buying their handicrafts, visiting their villages and expressing an interest in them there is some slim hope of change.

The government has put a lot of effort recently into environmental policies and by visiting the newly created national parks and voicing your approvals of the banning of plastic bags and phasing out of diesel and petrol, you can help to further encourage this development.

Avoid purchasing shell, coral or animal products and historical artefacts.

HOW MUCH?

Bottle of Coke Tk 10-20

Cup of cha (tea) Tk 2

Newspaper Tk 7

Sundarbans National Park
tour US\$150

Toilet paper Tk 10

TOP 10

BANGLADESH

India

Dhaka

TOP READS

Reading is an ideal way to get into the mindset of the nation. There are some great books that touch on various issues that have shaped Bangladesh. See also p13.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 <i>Brick Lane</i> (2003) Monica Ali 2 <i>Songs at the Rivers Edge</i> (1991) Katy Gardner 3 <i>A Golden Age</i> (2007) Tahmima Anam 4 <i>Lajja</i> (Shame; 1993) Taslima Nasrin 5 <i>Interpreter of Maladies</i> (1999) Jhumpa Lahiri 6 <i>The Departed Melody</i> (2003) Raja Tridiv Roy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7 <i>Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology</i> (1998) Krishna Detta and Andrew Robinson (eds) 8 <i>Seasonal Adjustments</i> (1995) Adib Khan 9 <i>A Quiet Violence: View from a Bangladeshi Village</i> (1983) Betsy Hartmann and James Boyce 10 <i>Midnight's Children</i> (1981) Salman Rushdie |
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WHO'S WHO OF BANGLADESH

On your travels through Bangladesh, you'll see portraits prominently displayed in family homes and shops throughout the country. Here is a list of people you should have heard of.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Begum Khaleda Zia – former prime minister and General Zia's widow; on trial for corruption at the time of writing 2 General Ershad – former president, jailed in 1991 for corruption and illegal possession of weapons 3 General Zia Rahman – sector commander of Z force, former president; assassinated 1981 4 Iajuddin Ahmed – president of caretaker government 5 Kazi Nazrul Islam – national poet; died 1976 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6 Mohammad Ashraful – captain of the Bangladesh cricket team 7 Rabindranath Tagore – Nobel Prize-winning poet; died 1941 8 Sheikh Hasina Wajed – Awami League president, former prime minister and daughter of Sheikh Mujibur; on trail for corruption at the time of writing 9 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – founder of Bangladesh; died 1975 10 Taslima Nasrin – exiled author |
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BEST OF GREEN BANGLADESH

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Banning of petrol and diesel vehicles (p38) 2 Banning of plastic bags (p38) 3 Creation of new national parks (p39) 4 Sundarbans National Park (p92) 5 Bandarban (p134) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6 Lowacherra National Park (p154) 7 Otter fishing (p82) 8 Tea estates (p154) 9 Rocket ride (p175) 10 Rice paddies (countrywide) |
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INTERNET RESOURCES

Bangladesh continues to become ever more tech-savvy and the following are the current hot sites to help with background reading and predeparture research.

Bangladesh Development Gateway (www.bangladeshgateway.org) A guide to the numerous development projects, organisations and activities in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (www.bangladeshtourism.gov.bd) The national tourism organisation website is user-friendly and has a wealth of information.

Daily Star (www.thedailystar.net) Online edition of one of the country's best regarded newspapers.

Discovery Bangladesh (www.discoverybangladesh.com) A great place to start getting an idea about the country and its people.

Independent (www.independent-bangladesh.com) Online edition of this highly regarded newspaper.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Succinct information, useful links and the popular Thorn Tree Travel Forum, which, though we say so ourselves, is easily the best place to get up-to-the-minute Bangladeshi travel advice.

Virtual Bangladesh (www.virtualbangladesh.com) Regularly updated, this is an extremely extensive resource for both cultural and historical facts, and travel information.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

TIGERS & TREKKING – THE BEST OF BANGLADESH Two weeks/ Dhaka to Rangamati

A fortnight in Bangladesh is the perfect amount of time to give you an overview of the country's scenery and culture.

Spend the first couple of days being swallowed up by **Dhaka** (p46). After following the city itinerary outlined on p49, head out on the **Rocket** (p175). This memorable boat ride to **Khulna** (p79) is a return to the age of romantic travel. After exploring Khulna's hectic markets and bazaars, head north for some **angling with otters** (p82) or south on a day trip to the landmark-filled historical town of **Bagerhat** (p88) where you will experience serene scenery and one of the most famous buildings in Bangladesh, the **Shait Gumbad Mosque** (p58).

Next, don your sea legs and join a cruise boat for a few days drifting through the tiger-haunted swamps of the **Sundarbans** (p92) before hopping on a flight back to Dhaka.

From here head east to the Buddhist tribes and forest peaks of **Bandarban** (p134) and then, if time allows, finish up with some island-hopping in plain-sailing **Rangamati** (p130).

An action-packed fortnight that takes in epic adventure on a Rocket ride, a hunt for the legendary otter fishermen, history in the shape of the mosques and temples, wildlife and wild spaces in the Sundarbans National Park and hiking in the Buddhist-flavoured hills of the east.



MONTH IN MOTION

Four weeks/Dhaka to Cox's Bazar

A month in Bangladesh will allow ample time to soak up many of the country's unexpected surprises.

Take your time in **Dhaka** (p46), following our two-day itinerary (p49). Ease yourself into the rhythm of rural life with a day trip out of the city to stately **Sonargaon** (p71) before heading further afield to the fascinating, but little visited, town of **Mymensingh** (p74) where gold dust, and lazy parks and gardens grace the town centre. Further out of town, search for the Mandi and monkeys in the **Madhupur National Park** (p77). Return to Dhaka and then zoom on a Rocket to **Barisal** (p97), from where any number of adventures await on the backwater tributaries to the south of the city. Head across to **Khulna** (p85) and incorporate the suggestions of the Tigers & Trekking itinerary (opposite). Be sure to take your time in the **Sundarbans** (p92).

Make your way back to Dhaka overland by bus, with a break in **Kushtia** (p83) to pay homage to saints, gurus and poets. After soaking up city life again, retreat to the peace of **Srimangal** (p152) for a nice cup of five-flavoured tea, tribal villages and a glorious jungle.

From Srimangal catch the train to **Chittagong** (p123). If you're an archaeology buff, get off en route at Comilla to visit the **Mainimati ruins** (p144). Spend a couple of days exploring sweaty Chittagong before venturing into the stunning Chittagong Hill Tracts for boating and Buddhas around **Rangamati** (p130), and mountain walks around the mist-swirling peaks of **Bandarban** (p134).

If you still have time, finish off by doing the beach Bangladeshi-style at **Cox's Bazar** (p136), four hours by bus from Chittagong.



This month of steady travel will show you the breadth and beauty of Bangladesh, from its tea plantations and beaches to its tribal hill tracts and cities. After this mammoth journey on buses, boats and trains, you will be able to say with utter confidence that you have experienced Bangladesh.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

FOR THE INDIANA JONES IN YOU

Three weeks/

Rajshahi to Chittagong Hill Tracts

Bangladesh isn't known for its past glories but, for the discerning historical buff, there's plenty of treasure to be found if you know where to look. This itinerary will take you on an amble through time, and through some Bangladeshi backwoods.

In Rajshahi division, spend a couple of weeks exploring some hard-to-get-to archaeological sites. From **Rajshahi** (p113) visit picturesque **Puthia** (p117) with its plethora of temples and palaces, and **Natore** (p118) with its sadhus (holy men) and ponds. You could also head out to **Gaud** (p120) on the Indian border; it's a messy journey but the scenery and a flurry of glorious mosques make it worthwhile.

Bogra (p101) is a happy base from which to travel to the majesty of kingdoms gone at **Mahasthangarh** (p103) and **Paharpur** (p104). From here you can also make the trip to **Sariakandi** (p103) and hire a boat to explore life on the Jamuna River.

Head back to Dhaka then take a train to **Chittagong** (p123), stopping on the way to check out the **Mainimati ruins** (p144) at Comilla. From Chittagong, don't miss out on the chance to vary the scenery with a sortie to the **Chittagong Hill Tracts** (p129) for some trekking, tribal encounters and gold-plated Buddhist stupas.

Juggle buses, boats and borders on a quest to reach the remote ruins and historical artefacts of Bangladesh. This three-week dream run is a real rural experience, and your visit might be a major event for the population of a far-flung village.



On the Road



STUART BUTLER Author

This photo was taken on the Buriganga River in Old Dhaka (p50). I'm looking a little uneasy because my boatman thought it was hilarious playing chicken with the 200-tonne cargo ships and ferries that steam up and down the river ploughing over anything in their path. Let's just hope that he never becomes a bus driver...

DON'T MISS

I'd seen the chimneys of the brick factories many times, but didn't realise just what making bricks entailed. The guys doing it have to have one of the most dangerous jobs in the world; they're literally working on top of a volcano. Go and visit one. A bad day at the office will never be the same again!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

English-born Stuart Butler has travelled extensively in South Asia over the past decade in search of empty surf, unlikely stories and fodder for his camera lenses, but he considers Bangladesh to be the most refreshing and enjoyable country in the region. When not getting stuck in Dhaka's rickshaw jams he writes about his travels, which have taken him beyond the borders of Bangladesh to places as diverse as the coastal deserts of Pakistan and the jungles of Colombia, for the world's surfing and travel media. He now calls the beaches of southwest France home.

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