

Sylhet Division



Damp and green Sylhet division, a place of myriad waterways and gentle bumplike hills crowned in lurid green tea plantations, is one of the more scenically attractive parts of the country. Aside from the regional capital, Sylhet, which is a town of worldly ambition and religious contentment, this is a state kitted out with the naturalist in mind. Such people will find endless opportunities for entertainment in the forests and lakes that weave a tapestry around the numerous rivers and fruit plantations.

It is tea, though, that is the real heart of life here. Sylhet division produces over 55 million kg of tea annually, with more than 150 tea estates spread over 40,000 hectares. It's the chance to visit a tea estate and learn something about the processes that culminate in your morning cuppa that has put the friendly town of Srimangal, in the south of the division, firmly on the fledgling Bangladesh tourist map.

The area along the northern border of this diverse region, at the foot of the Khasi-Jaintia hills, is tribal land and for the adventurous anthropologist the opportunity to make friends with the shy Khashia (or Khasi), Pangou and Tripura people is an exciting notion. Another major tribal group of the area are the Monipuri (Manipuri), much more integrated into mainstream Bangladeshi life. The best-known feature of their culture is the tribe's classical dance, which tells the story of Krishna's love affair with the female cowherd Radha. She symbolises human spirituality, while Krishna is the embodiment of divine love. Regardless of cultural background this love and spirituality is what shines through in all the people you meet here.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Learning the secrets of your morning cuppa in the montage of tea estates surrounding **Srimangal** (p152)
- Feeding black magicians with fish food at the **Shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal** (opposite), a 14th-century Sufi mystic in Sylhet
- Swinging through the trees of the densely vegetated **Lowacherra National Park** (p154) in search of the elusive gibbons
- Ticking off ruddy crakes, pochards and bee-eaters on the *haors* (wetlands) near **Sunamganj** (p151)



SYLHET

☎ 0821

Sylhet is a strange kind of place. The majority of British Bangladeshis are from the city or its environs and are likely to wax lyrical over the place. Those with stronger ties to the homeland continue to pour money back into the local economy and this has helped to create one of the most surreal city centres in Bangladesh. A string of apparently flashy Western-style shopping malls built on their money have taken over the centre, but on entering one you discover that they're nothing but a façade of half-empty sari shops. It doesn't take long to realise that this façade extends to the city as a whole and that Sylhet is actually little more than a village with shoes too big for it. Despite this, it remains one of the most cosmopolitan towns in Bangladesh and you're almost certainly going to meet more people here speaking with a strong Brummie or East London accent (some more genuine than others) than anywhere else in the country. More depressingly for Bangladesh, you also won't fail to notice the dozens of adverts and billboards promising easy visas to a better life in the US, UK and other European countries. These startling contrasts help to make Sylhet an almost essential stop for anyone who wants to understand something of this country.

Orientation & Information

On the south side of the Surma River you'll find the train and bus stations, but not much more. The river is traversed by two bridges. Kean Bridge, the more central one, was repaired after being damaged by Pakistani bombers during the Liberation War. In making the crossing, rickshaw-pullers are aided by rickshaw-pushers; these 'assistants' are paid Tk 2 for their service. This bridge is almost a sight in its own right – only a subcontinental bridge could contain so much seething humanity.

Zinda Bazar Rd is littered with restaurants and shopping centres, as is the intersection of Telihaor and Taltala Rds.

There are only a couple of internet cafés in town and none offer fast connections. The most central one is **Ahana Net & Cyber Café** (Jaintiapur Rd; ☎ 9am-8pm; per hr Tk 20).

There is a **Standard Chartered Bank** (Airport Rd) with an ATM opposite Darga Gate, and others below both the Hotel Asia and the Surma Valley Rest House.

Sights

SHRINE OF HAZRAT SHAH JALAL

In the north of the city, off Airport Rd, is the **Shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal**, a 14th-century Sufi saint. The shrine is one of the biggest pilgrimage sites in the country and a fascinating place to visit. Being buried near the saint is considered a great honour. Shah Jalal's sword and robes are preserved within the large new mosque, but aren't on display. The tomb is covered with rich brocade, and at night the space around it is illuminated with candles. The atmosphere is quite magical. It's never entirely clear whether non-Muslims can visit the shrine, though it seems to be OK if you are suitably solemn and well dressed. Women, however, are definitely not allowed up to the tomb.

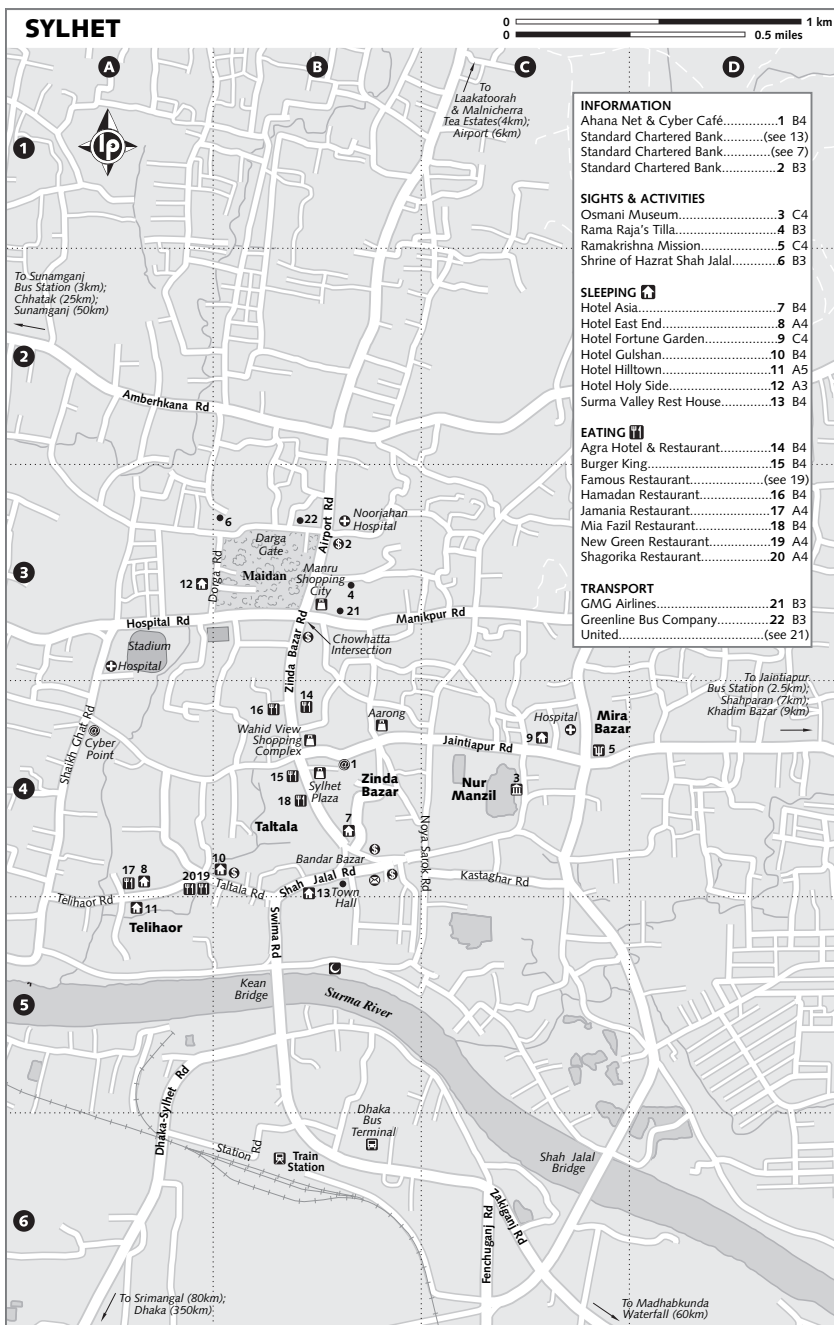
The pond in front of the shrine complex is filled with sacred catfish that are fed by pilgrims and are, according to legend, metamorphosed black magicians of the Hindu raja Gour Govinda, who was defeated by Shah Jalal in 1303. Nearby is a deep, dark well containing something mysterious. What exactly that is remains a little uncertain – if our translation was correct, it's a giant goldfish with 'Allah' written on its forehead, but then again it might just as likely be the Loch Ness monster!

The complex is thronging with people day and night, including many beggars and disabled people asking for alms, so if you wish to donate bring plenty of small change with you.

Nearby, on a hillock named **Rama Raja's Tilla**, you can get some partially blocked views of the city. Legend has it a Hindu temple that once stood here was destroyed by an earthquake, instigated by Shah Jalal.

OSMANI MUSEUM

In Nur Manzil, near the centre of town and east of Noya Sarok Rd, is the **Osmani Museum** (admission free; ☎ 10.30am-5.30pm Sat-Wed, 3-8pm Fri Apr-Sep, 9.30am-4.30pm Sat-Wed, 3-8pm Fri Oct-Mar). This small, colonial-era house is dedicated to General Osmani, a key figure in the Liberation War. As it's one of the few tourist sights in town, you should visit, but be warned – it's slightly less interesting than an algebra lesson. It contains such thrilling articles as a 'chair' (and that is exactly what it is). Electricity is a hit-and-miss affair and if you're lucky you'll get a man following you around with an oil lamp to illuminate the displays for you.



A block to the northeast is the **Ramakrishna Mission**, where Hindu melas are often held.

Sleeping BUDGET

A number of budget hotels are in the centre of town, in Taltala, along Taltala Rd, and in the adjoining Telihaor area.

Hotel Asia (☎ 711 278; Bandar Bazar; s/d Tk 100/300, d with air-con Tk 800; 🏠) Do yourself a favour and grab a bargain at this hotel in the heart of a colourful neighbourhood. The rooms are plain and honest budget treats that come without stains and mess. Go for one without air-con as they are better value.

Hotel East End (☎ 719 210; Telihaor Rd; s/d Tk 150/300, d with air-con Tk 1000; 🏠) This friendly hotel with easy English-speaking staff represents good bang for your buck. The rooms are immaculately clean, though strangely the non-air-con rooms are the better deal, thanks to tiled floors which just make everything much more hygienic.

Hotel Hilltown (☎ 716 077; Telihaor Rd; s with/without air-con Tk 255/850, d with/without air-con Tk 350/1000; 🏠) The range of rooms on offer at this old stand-by fills an entire A4 sheet, which means almost everyone can find something suitable. Rooms are tiled and clean but lack character, and corridors can be a bit long and lonely. The standard air-con doubles are better than most. You can arrange car hire from the handful of travel agencies situated just outside and there's a good restaurant on site too.

Hotel Gulshan (☎ 717 263; Taltala Rd; s/d Tk 300/500, d with air-con Tk 800; 🏠) A long-time favourite with visitors to Sylhet and easily the best in its class, this enormous hotel is almost as big as Bangladesh and much better managed. All rooms are clean and some have sit-down toilets and TV, but only the most expensive ones have hot water. The restaurant doesn't have an atmosphere worth partaking in.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hotel Holy Side (☎ 722 278; Dorga Rd; s/d from Tk 650/950; 🏠) A very good value midrange/top-end establishment. This welcoming place has the bonus of proximity to the shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal (though it's not so close that your eardrums take a battering), invitingly soft beds and clean bathtubs to get sloshy in. It's opposite the maidan, which ensures something interesting is always taking place right outside the door. Add an extra 15% tax to room rates.

Hotel Fortune Garden (☎ 715 590; www.hotelfortune.garden.com; 29A Bongobir Rd; s/d Tk 700/1000, d with air-con from Tk 1400; 🏠) Sylhet's top-dog hotel is sterile to the core and offers no hint of being in Bangladesh, but it does offer exceptional value for taka and you know a decent night's kip is guaranteed. The staff are entertainingly disorganised.

Surma Valley Rest House (☎ 712 671; Shah Jalal Rd; r from Tk 1450; 🏠) This sparkling and central hotel is one to write home about and certainly one of the better-value hotels in Bangladesh. Rooms are comfortable enough to mean that leaving will be an effort, and though not huge, the space is nicely used and full of little homely touches. In fact the only minus point we could come up with is its proximity to a noisy mosque, but surely that 5am prayer call will grow on you!

Eating

If you're staying in the Telihaor area, you'll have lots of choices, including the friendly **New Green Restaurant** (meals Tk 40-50), **Shagorika Restaurant** (meals Tk 40-50) and the unmistakably turquoise **Jamania Restaurant** (meals Tk 50), which receives rave reviews from travellers. For something marginally posher, and we mean marginally, try the **Famous Restaurant** (meals Tk 60), which is on the same road.

Mia Fazil Restaurant (Zinda Bazar Rd; meals Tk 60) One of tonnes of identical Bengali restaurants. This one reserves a warm welcome for foreigners and always makes room for you, no matter how busy (and it normally is). Look for the yellow Bengali sign.

Agra Hotel & Restaurant (Zinda Bazar Rd; meals around Tk 60) As full of character as it is full of characters, this popular restaurant, tucked away in a corner, won't give you much privacy with its cramped quarters, but will give you great food.

Burger King (Zinda Bazar Rd; meals Tk 50-100) The name might ring a bell but nothing else about this 2nd-floor restaurant will. Its greasy burgers and kebabs will provide a welcome break from all that healthy rice (don't worry, it's good for the heart).

Hamadan Restaurant (☎ 812 872; 4th fl, Al-Hamra Shopping Centre, Zinda Bazar Rd; dishes from Tk 150-200) This is Sylhet's special-occasion restaurant and it's certainly a nice break from the heat and crush outside. Unfortunately the food, which is mainly Chinese and Thai, is hardly worthy of the fuss – we've had tomato salads

that contained more meat than our chicken dish! To find it, take the escalators to the third floor and climb the stairwell at the back left-hand corner of the building.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Both United Airways (which also has an office at the airport) and **GMG Airlines** (☎ 721 225; Feroz Centre, Manikpur Rd) have frequent daily flights to Dhaka (Tk 3720).

BUS

A daytime bus trip between Dhaka and Sylhet is an interesting journey through varied countryside. All the luxury bus companies have offices on the road leading to the shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal.

Greenline have a luxury bus for Dhaka (Tk 450, five hours) at 12.30am, but other companies offer more sensible departure times.

Buses to Chittagong (Tk 650, 10 hours) generally set sail in the evening only.

Buses to Sunamganj (Tk 50 to Tk 75, 2½ hours, every 20 minutes between 6am and 8.30pm) leave from the Sunamganj bus station a few kilometres northwest of town, along Amberkhana Rd.

Buses northeast to Jaintiapur (Tk 40, three hours, between 6.45am and 5.35pm) and Tamabil (Tk 75, 2½ hours) leave from the small **Jaintiapur bus station** (Jaintiapur Rd), several kilometres east of the town centre.

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 83968) is on the south side of town. There are three daily express trains for Dhaka (1st/sulob class Tk 270/150, between 7½ and nine hours, depart at 7.30am, 2.45pm and 10.15pm). The night train also has a sleeping car (air-con/fan Tk 610/425).

Trains to Chittagong (1st/sulob class Tk 320/190, 10 hours, depart 10am and 10.40pm) also stop at Comilla (1st/sulob class Tk 195/120, 6½ hours).

Most of these trains also stop at Srimangal (1st/sulob class Tk 90/50, two hours).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport, 7km north of town, has numerous taxis and baby taxis (mini rickshaws) waiting. For a ride into town, expect to pay about Tk 300 for a taxi, Tk 100 for a baby taxi.

AROUND SYLHET

Tea Estates

Tea-estate managers haven't cottoned on to their tourist potential, so don't expect a tour on a dune buggy followed by a complimentary cuppa. At best, you'll get permission to be there, and maybe a quick tour with a staff member.

There are a couple of tea estates just beyond the city's northern outskirts on Airport Rd and these are probably the easiest to visit. It's not normally a problem just to stroll straight in – someone is certain to adopt you and show you around. At the **Laakatoorah Tea Estate**, you might be lucky enough to get an interesting lecture from the manager on the history of tea production.

The largest number of tea estates in the northern half of Sylhet division are further on, around **Jaflang**, near the Indian border. This is one of the most scenic parts of Sylhet division and a major tribal area, where many Khasi are found. The bus from Sylhet takes 2½ hours to Tamabil and another 30 minutes to Jaflang. Remind the bus-wallah that you want to get off at Jaflang – it's easy to miss.

Shrine of Shah Paran

Around 8km east of Sylhet, just off the highway to Jaintiapur, is the **Shrine of Shah Paran** in the tiny village of Shahparan. It's a single-domed mosque that attracts about 2000 pilgrims a day; you'll see charter buses from Dhaka all around the place.

Madhabkunda Waterfall

A three-hour drive southeast of Sylhet (and equally accessible from Srimangal by road and rail), and a 3km rickshaw ride from Dakshinbagh train station, is the famous **waterfall** of Madhabkunda. It is popular with busloads of Bangladeshi tourists. You may also be able to find some elephants, which are still being used to haul huge logs, in this general area. There's a Parjatan tourist spot nearby, with a restaurant, picnic area and toilet facilities.

TAMABIL

The Tamabil border crossing (open between 6am and 5pm), 55km north from Sylhet, is primarily used to import coal from India, though foreigners occasionally cross here. Getting to the border can be messy – some travellers have reported being confused as

to where the official crossing actually is, but all declare the hassle well worth the scenery between Dawki and Shillong in India: it's spectacular. Coming from India, Sylhet division is a nice way to ease yourself into Bangladesh.

To cross from Tamabil to Dawki, you *must* deposit Tk 300 departure tax into any Sonali Bank branch. Once you have done this, you are required to show your deposit receipt to border officials. The closest Sonali Bank branch is in Jaintiapur, 13km from Tamabil.

Plan in advance to have some rupee/taka on you – there is nowhere to change money in Tamabil, and the bank at Dawki is none too cooperative.

Getting There & Away

FROM BANGLADESH

Buses run from Sylhet to Tamabil (Tk 75, 2½ hours). From here, it's a 15-minute hike to the border.

Once in India, it's a 1.5km walk (or Rs 30 taxi ride) to the town of Dawki, from where buses run to Shillong (Rs 70, 2½ hours). If you are stranded in Dawki, there is a small hotel on the hill, above the Sikh temple, though it's super basic and often loath to take foreigners – start your journey early in order to avoid getting caught out.

The last bus leaves Dawki for Shillong around 11am. If you miss it, there are a number of taxis eager to take you the two hours to Shillong, but you'll pay dearly for the honour!

FROM INDIA

The border post is at Dawki in Meghalaya, accessible by bus from Shillong, 70km away. From Dawki, it is a 1.5km walk to Tamabil, where formal but friendly border officials may be able to help you negotiate a taxi to Sylhet, which shouldn't cost more than about Tk 700.

There is nowhere to stay the night in Tamabil, but nearby Jafalang has a couple of budget hotels and restaurants. It is also easier to organise onward transport from here.

SUNAMGANJ

☎ 0871

Approximately 70km west of Sylhet, this small town offers little for tourists. However, the local *haors* (wetlands) are rife with bird life. From midwinter through to the end of March and sometimes April, migrants, winter birds and residents all get together for a big bird party. Varieties of rails, raptors, ducks, sandpipers and others congregate.

The three *haors* that seem to be the best for bird-watching are several hours upstream

TWITCHING IN THE SUNAMGANJ HAORS *Dave Johnson*

For a worthwhile tour of the Sunamganj *haors*, you'll need at least four days to find some exciting bird species. Baer's pochard is probably the rarest bird, and not difficult to spot if you're there at the right time; other pochards include the white-eyed and red-crested varieties. The Baikal teal and the falcated teal are both impressive winterers, along with an assortment of crakes, including the ruddy crake and the little crake. You'll also see the spotted redshank and the blue-bearded bee-eater, and the assortment continues with various sandpipers and lapwings. A number of raptors are here as well, including several fishing eagles, such as the grey-headed and spotted Pallas' eagles. So little has been done to record species here that it's not unreasonable to expect to see new, previously unrecorded species during each trip.

The trip begins at Aila Haor, four hours upriver. A knowledgeable boatman will know exactly where to go. It's another two hours on foot into the *haor* area, but it's worth it for the rich bird life awaiting. It may be dark by the time you return to the boat, so carry a torch. You'll sleep on the boat and continue to Pasua early next morning.

Pasua Haor, four hours upriver, lies just over an embankment from the river. You can sit and watch the wildlife or walk for a couple of kilometres on the fringes of the marshy basin. After another four hours' travel the next morning, you'll arrive at Tangua Haor, bordering India and the furthest point of the trip. In this area, scrub and grassland are a bonus, and you'll see some interesting grassland species of birds.

On the return trip to Sunamganj, river travel is spartan yet peaceful, and it is an exceptional way to experience rural life in Bangladesh, where so much takes place on or near a river's edge.

from the Surma River. Visiting all of them is a four-day affair, which, except for true bird enthusiasts, is probably more than most travellers want. An overnight trip would get you into some of the most fascinating rural areas in Bangladesh. See boxed text, p151 for a fascinating account of a birder's trip up here.

Getting There & Away

From Sylhet, there are regular buses to Sunamganj (Tk 50 to Tk 75, 2½ hours), leaving from **Sunamganj bus station** (Amberhkhana Rd). Buses from Sunamganj to Sylhet depart approximately every 20 minutes from the bus station.

SRIMANGAL

☎ 08626

Put the kettle on and let's have a nice cup of tea. But have you ever wondered what goes into producing that little bag? Well, in Srimangal (or Sreemongal), the tea capital of Bangladesh, you can find out all about it. This hilly area, with tea estates, lemon orchards and pineapple plantations, is one of the most pic-

turesque and enjoyable parts of the country. For miles around, tea estates form a perennially green carpet on the sloping hills, and it's the one area (besides the Sundarbans) where it is possible to look around and not see another human being. In addition to learning all there is to know about tea, you can also go primate-potty in a range of forest national parks, get the low-down on tribal life and discover that pineapples don't actually grow on trees.

Information

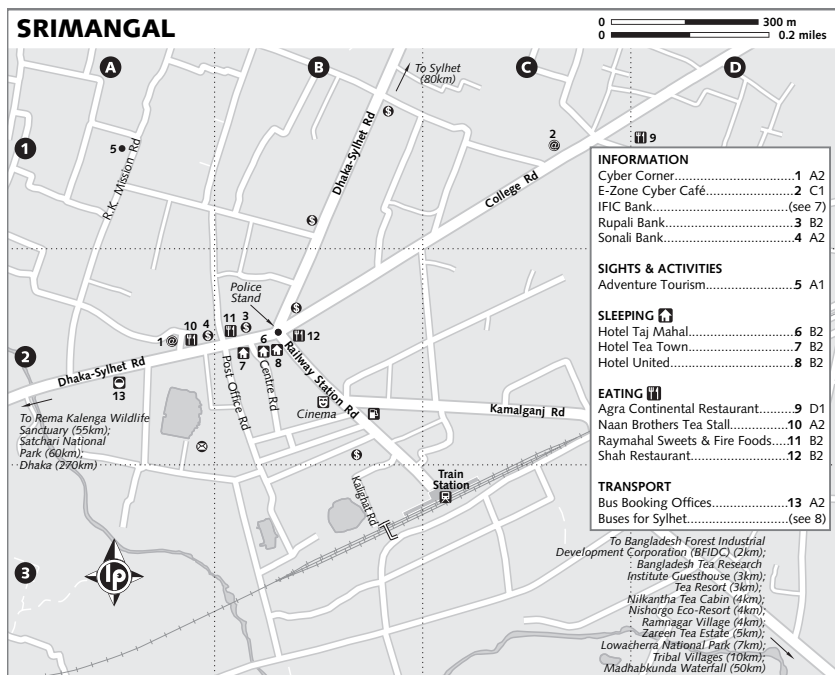
Within a stone's throw of each other on the main drag, College Rd, is a Rupali Bank, Sonali Bank and IFIC Bank, but they'll probably think you crazy if you ask about changing money with them.

Cyber Corner (per hr Tk 25) At the end of the long corridor under the Hotel Mukta.

E-Zone Cyber Café (per hr Tk 30) Excellent connections on the outskirts of town.

Tours

Adventure Tourism (☎ 01712 317483; enjoylife_45@yahoo.com; RK Mission Rd) Run by the ambitious Mr



Rashed Husan. Adventure Tourism organises day tours (Tk 800 per person) taking in a tea estate, the Lowacherra National Park, some tribal villages and various other sights of interest in the region. It's an effective way to tick off all the sights quickly and painlessly, but his guides aren't very knowledgeable. If he doesn't find you, you can find him through the Hotel Tea Town. He also rents out bikes (Tk 150 to Tk 200 per day).

Sleeping

Hotel Taj Mahal (Dhaka-Sylhet Rd; s/d Tk 50/100) The world's most beautiful monument to love it isn't, but it is the sort of place that looks like it sees a lot of paid-for love... Even so, for the price it's hard to fault and the small rooms are kept fairly clean.

Hotel United (☎ 88297; Dhaka-Sylhet Rd; s/d Tk 100/200) Next door to the Taj Mahal, the Hotel United offers cramped rooms that are shockingly clean and good value and come with rare extras like mosquito nets and sit-down toilets. It's friendly and they are happy for women to stay, but couples get single beds only.

Hotel Tea Town (☎ 370; Dhaka-Sylhet Rd; s/d Tk 300/400, ste from Tk 800) The town centre's glitziest hotel has sparkling floors and, in the suites, sit-down toilets and hot-water showers. The cheaper rooms lack such mod cons but are just as well tended.

ourpick Bangladesh Tea Research Institute Guesthouse (BTRI; ☎ 71225; r Tk 400) Live, breathe, touch and taste it. There is simply no escaping it. Tea – it's everywhere in Srimangal, so what better place to stay than right here in the heart of the Bangladesh tea universe. Located a couple of kilometres out of town, this charming guesthouse is right opposite the Research Institute and has large, well-furnished rooms with thick carpets, regal green curtains, inviting bathtubs and, best of all, lovely verandas with tables and chairs, where you can sit back with – what else – a perfect cuppa and admire the beautifully maintained gardens. Meals are available for around Tk 200 per day. It's a good idea to book accommodation in advance.

Nishorgo Eco-Resort (www.nishorgo.org; r Tk 1000) Several positive reports have come in of a newly opened accommodation venture run by Nishorgo, the recently formed and very active government-run group in charge of all the protected areas in the country. It has several basic, thatched 'jungle' huts that come

with attached bathrooms. To stay at this resort, located halfway between Srimangal and Lowacherra National Park, contact Mr Kazi Shamsul Hogue (☎ 0171 5041207).

Tea Resort (☎ /fax 207/8; r Tk 1100-2300) The Tea Resort, tucked away amongst the tea gardens 3km from Srimangal is, unfortunately, not among the best places to stay in the country – though it could very easily become one. The cheap rooms had cockroaches when we visited and looked very tatty, and while the more expensive rooms are better, they are still overpriced. We have also received less than positive comments regarding the restaurant. So why are we mentioning it? Simple: because it seems to be *de rigueur* when visiting Srimangal to stay here and most people book in advance.

Eating

Food is something of a struggle in Srimangal and especially hard is breakfast. The best bet at this early hour is to buy some of the delicious, home-made shortbread biscuits that many of the little grocery shops sell and find a tea stall hidden from penetrating gazes. One such place that comes highly recommended is the Naan Brothers Tea Stall, halfway down the main road (look out for the sacks of rice and pulses in the neighbouring grocery shop). There is no sign and it doesn't kick into gear until after 9am.

ourpick Nilkantha Tea Cabin (Ramnagar village) The Nilkantha Tea Cabin, around 5km south of town, produces the almost world-famous Willy Wonka-esque five-colour tea. Yes, it does have five distinct layers of colour and five equally differing tastes. In addition to the five-colour tea (Tk 50), there are dozens of other flavours (from Tk 5) and the tea cabin has turned into a social institution for the young of the area. A baby taxi from town shouldn't cost more than Tk 20.

Shah Restaurant (Railway Station Rd; meals around Tk 50) In the heart of town, a few doors south of the main intersection, the Shah turns out filling and tasty meals.

Raymahal Sweets and Fire Foods (Dhaka-Sylhet Rd; meals around Tk 50) An excellent range of sugary treats and Western fast-food imitations.

Agra Continental Restaurant (☎ 71141; Guho Rd; mains Tk 200; ☎ midday-11pm) Every town needs a Chinese restaurant and this new establishment on the edge of town is one of the genre's better examples. It's the only relaxing, sit-

down place to eat in town and is frequented by locals on special occasions.

Getting There & Away

BUS

To take a local bus to Dhaka (Tk 100, five hours) or Sylhet (Tk 65, three hours), you will have to hail one on the road. You can try the same for Comilla (Tk 200, six hours), Kamalganj (Tk 15) and Lowacherra National Park (Tk 10).

There are three booking offices for coaches along the main road in close proximity to each other. These service Dhaka (non-air-con/air-con Tk 200/250, five hours, every 30 minutes) and Chittagong (Tk 350, 12 hours). Buses for Sylhet also have offices on the main drag near the main intersection.

TRAIN

There are three trains a day to Dhaka (1st/*sulob* class Tk 200/110; 5½ hours; depart 9.56am, 5.05pm and 12.37am), except for Tuesday and Wednesday when there are only two. Afternoon trains also have air-con compartments (Tk 300) and evening trains have sleepers (Tk 500).

AROUND SRIMANGAL

Sights & Activities

CYCLING

The area around Srimangal is one of the best in Bangladesh for cycling. Despite the rolling terrain, the roads are reasonably level; if overly encumbered rickshaw-wallahs can do it, so can you, even on the ubiquitous one-speed Chinese bike.

There's an intricate network of roads connecting all the tea estates to the main highways. Only the major routes are tarred or bricked, but the dirt roads are in good condition. Even if you just head east out of town on Kamalganj Rd and stay on the main roads, you will find yourself weaving in and out of heaven in no time.

It can be difficult to determine where one estate stops and another starts. Bear in mind that you might inadvertently pedal into private property. Though you will find that most people are more likely to treat you like a guest than a trespasser, it is appropriate to seek management's permission to be there.

TEA ESTATES

There are so many tea estates that it's not easy to determine which are the best for vis-

iting. Some are more receptive to visitors than others.

One of the most frequently visited and welcoming estates is **Zareen Tea Estate**, where the tea bushes bounce across the tops of the cartoonlike hills that so typify this area. The turn-off for the gardens is located roughly halfway between the Tea Resort and Lowacherra National Park.

The sprawling **Finlays** estate, just on the edge of Srimangal, is less visitor-certain, but it's not normally a problem to wander a short way into the bushes and talk to the tea-pluckers.

The **Bangladesh Tea Research Institute** (BTRI; ☎ 71225) isn't a commercial estate as such, but rather the scientific headquarters of Bangladeshi tea production. New strains of tea and new growing techniques are tried out here, and the staff are knowledgeable and very happy to spread that knowledge. There is also a production factory, which with a bit of luck you might be allowed to visit, and a tea-tasting room which you are almost certain to be ushered into. It is polite to give advance notice of your visit. See also p156.

LOWACHERRA NATIONAL PARK

Around 8km east of Srimangal, on the road to Kamalganj, **Lowacherra National Park** (known to locals as Shaymoli) is a wild and mysterious patch of tropical semi-evergreen forest absolutely crawling with life. Not only is this 1250-hectare park (which forms part of a 2740-hectare protected zone known as the West Bhanugach Reserve) one of the finest wildlife venues in the country, but it's also one of the easiest to visit. Though the forest may look like a primeval jungle, it has been greatly influenced by the activities of humans, and as recently as 1920 it was managed as a timber-production plantation. Since then the forest has been largely allowed to revert to a natural state, and after years of mismanagement the government has finally got its act together and given the park firm protection, established a number of visitor walking trails and is in the process of training up 'eco-guides'.

The undisputed highlight of the park is the critically endangered hoolock gibbon – the subcontinent's only ape species and one that you have a pretty good chance of seeing crashing through the trees. A further 19 mammal species have been identified including capped langur, the delightful slow loris, orange-bellied Himalayan squirrel and bark-

TEA GARDENS & TEA ESTATES

Tea production in Bangladesh dates from 1854, when Malnicherra Tea Estate, just north of Sylhet, was set up by the British. The tea grew well here and by the end of the century there were around 150 tea estates, almost all under British ownership. About the same number exist today but, since Independence, less than half are British-owned. The rest mainly belong to wealthy Bangladeshis and, to a lesser extent, the government's Tea Board.

When the British began growing tea in Sylhet, they didn't bother training the indigenous people. Rather, they brought experienced Indian labourers, mainly from tea estates in Bihar, Orissa and Bangla (West Bengal). Today, virtually all of the labourers, or 'coolies', are descendants of these original Hindus. Small Hindu shrines are a common feature of tea estates with worker colonies.

Each estate provides an elementary school and a doctor. Since many of the estates are in remote locations, few of the workers' children are able to go beyond the primary grades. However, the tea workers have the only trade union in Bangladesh that effectively bargains with management, so their contracts often include special privileges, such as a festival allowance. New Year's Eve is one of the most festive times, in part because the tea season is over. Hinduism does not ban alcohol and many workers get a bit tipsy at festival time. Several private 'clubs' outside Srimangal cater to the owners and managers year-round. Faced with these long-standing traditions, the government looks the other way.

When you are visiting a tea estate, as you must, don't make the mistake of touring on a Friday, the day of rest, or visiting between mid-December and the start of March, as everything will be at a standstill. The picking season is during the wetter months, from early March to early December, when the factories are in full operation.

ing deer. The bird-watching here is equally superb and so far some 246 species have been recorded, with the blue-bearded bee-eater and the red-breasted trogon being big stars. Another highlight are the orchids, of which there are more than 20 varieties (the wet season is the best time to see them).

Remember though that this isn't the open African savanna but a dense forest, and despite the impressive number of animals you would have to put in a good deal of effort to get anything other than a fleeting glimpse. One thing you won't miss though are the insects, and rather than concentrating on the bigger mammals you will find your visit more rewarding if you focus instead on the bugs and birds. Of these bugs, the most visible are the ropelike columns of aggressive ants, the flamboyant butterflies and, maybe less welcome, the enormous orb spiders (also called banana spiders). You won't be able to miss these black, red and yellow monsters hanging from spiderman-sized webs between trees, but don't worry, they might look like the devil incarnate but they are in fact harmless – or so we're told!

There are three marked walking trails taking anything from half an hour to three hours, and the visitors centre has printed booklets with walking maps and some pointers on

things to look out for. You can also hire 'eco-guides' from here, but try and chat to them first as many don't speak much English and have very little real knowledge of the plants and animals contained within the forest.

To access the reserve from Srimangal, take the paved road east towards Kamalganj. The poorly marked turn-off to your left (north), which is easy to miss, is about 4.75km past the Tea Resort compound and another 2.75km beyond the well-marked turn-off for the Nurjahan and Madabpore tea estates. The dirt road into the forests, which crosses the railroad tracks, is less than 1km long and an easy walk. A bus from Srimangal costs Tk 10.

TRIBAL VILLAGES

There are 11 Khashia villages (called *punji*) and several Monipuri villages (called *para*) scattered among the tea plantations in the Srimangal area. Khashia villages are usually on hilltops surrounded by betel-nut trees, which is their cash crop. When visiting a Khashia village you should first call in on the local chief, as the community will not extend full hospitality without his permission. The easiest way of visiting one of the Khashia communities is to ask one of the guides at Lowacherra National Park to lead you to one of the villages situated on the nearby park fringes.

DR MAINULHUQ

Dr Mainulhuq is a scientist working for the Bangladesh Tea Research Institute. He spoke to us about the production and history of tea in Bangladesh.

Where did tea originate from and when did it arrive in Bangladesh? Tea originated in China around 2500 BC, when an emperor was meditating beside some boiling water. Whilst he was doing this, a tea leaf fell into the water. After he had finished meditating, he drank the water and tea was born. Robert Bruce, who worked for the British Army, saw Assamese people drinking tea and came up with the idea of growing it in Bangladesh. Production first began in 1854.

How much tea is produced per year in Bangladesh? We make around 55 to 60 million kg of tea a year, of which about 10 to 15 million kg is exported to Pakistan, the Middle East and Europe. Almost all the tea we produce here is black tea. I think only one estate makes green tea.

Tell us something of the life cycle of a tea bush? Firstly, all tea bushes are the same species, each one in the world. It is the altitude they are grown at and the processing that gives them their distinct flavours. Srimangal is very low, just 75m above sea level, which makes it one of the lowest tea-growing areas in the world. The many trees you will see planted among the tea bushes are to give them shade, because this low altitude means it gets very hot. The tea leaves can be first plucked after only a year. For the first five years of the bush's life it is considered young tea, but mature tea, after the bush is over about eight years old, is best. The life of the plant is around 100 years but its economic life lasts until the bush is around 60 years old. After a tea bush dies we replace it with another crop, such as citronella, which quickly allows the soil to recuperate before we replant with tea again after two years. We have to trim the tea plants frequently, otherwise they would grow into trees. We keep them at elbow height for ease of picking.

Why is it only women who pick the tea? Women are much better at it because they have smaller and more delicate hands, which helps with the picking, and they are better at concentrating than men.

Can you tell us how to make the perfect cup of tea? Well, firstly you must never use tea bags, because the tea dust pollutes it. You should use 2.5g of tea leaves with 190mL of water and leave it to brew for five minutes. If you like milk tea, put the milk in last so that you can gauge the strength of the tea properly.

One of the easiest Monipuri villages to visit is called **Ramnagar**, close to the Bangladesh Tea Research Institute; if you call in on the institute you will be able to get directions.

SATCHARI NATIONAL PARK

About 60km southwest of Srimangal on the Dhaka–Sylhet Hwy is the small **Satchari National Park** (formerly known as the Telepara Forest Reserve). This 243-hectare park is part of a much larger protected region. Although less popular than Lowacherra, it is a superb slab of tropical forest with a higher diversity of plants and animals than Lowacherra, and with far less human disturbance.

There are a number of marked walking trails of between 30 minutes and three hours, seven streams, a population of hoolock gibbons, fishing cats, Phayre's langur, jungle fowl, pygmy woodpeckers and oriental pied hornbills.

The Satchari National Park is on the south side of the main road, about 1km east of the Satchari bus stop and Telepara Tea Estate, where the highway takes a sharp left bend. You could get the driver of the Dhaka–Sylhet bus to drop you off here, if you don't mind missing the early hours when bird-watching is best. Alternatively, get a bus from Srimangal and walk to the trail head 1km away. To return to Srimangal, flag down one of the Dhaka–Sylhet buses, or walk back to Telepara Tea Estate and catch one there.

REMA KALENGA WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

The **Rema Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary**, near Satchari National Park, is a very rarely visited region of upland forest that provides a home to numerous bird species, capped langur, slow loris and fishing cats. It has a similar system of walking trails to Satchari.

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