



# Rajshahi Division

If Indiana Jones were a real man, then he'd be living in Rajshahi division. For tucked away in this unknown corner of the country are a plethora of ruins and reminders. In fact there's so much history stashed away up here that you sometimes feel that you can't move without tripping over some other forgotten temple or decaying palace. Though today largely removed from mainstream Bangladeshi life, the rich soils of Rajshahi division once held court for powerful Buddhist kingdoms, neutered Hindu empires and fell easily to the embrace of Islam; all of which have left their mark in the tumble-down walls that litter the region.

However, it's not just about relics: there are small villages where children will leap in the air in excitement at the sight of you; passionate market towns full of colour; and, if you're very lucky, views to the great Himalayan peak of Kanchenjunga.

But at the end of the day it's the sense of past glories that is the highlight of this region, and what is so remarkable about this historical fantasy is that you will almost certainly have these ancient sights all to yourself – even Indiana Jones hasn't got the secret map to Rajshahi's treasures.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Perusing the art of **Kantanagar Temple** (p111) and relishing the gorgeous countryside
- Standing in the footsteps of the Buddha at **Paharpur** (p104), the most impressive archaeological site in Bangladesh
- Counting back the years at **Mahasthangarh** (p103), the oldest known city in Bangladesh
- Chilling under the mango-tree mosques of **Gaud** (p120)
- Wondering where everyone else is in temple-riddled **Puthia** (p117) and philosophising with sadhus (itinerant holy men) in **Natore** (p118)



## BOGRA

☎ 051

Bogra, a sprawling town with a small heart, serves primarily as a base from which to explore two of the country's most famous and impressive archaeological sites – Mahasthangarh (p103) and Paharpur (p104). The former is 10km north of town, and the breathtaking latter, 53km to the northwest. It would be an exaggeration to describe Bogra itself as attractive or exciting, but it does have a couple of little treats that make saving a morning for the town worthwhile. These include the Chandi (a boisterous central market area), an interesting rajbari (palace) and an eccentric dream zoo.

### Information

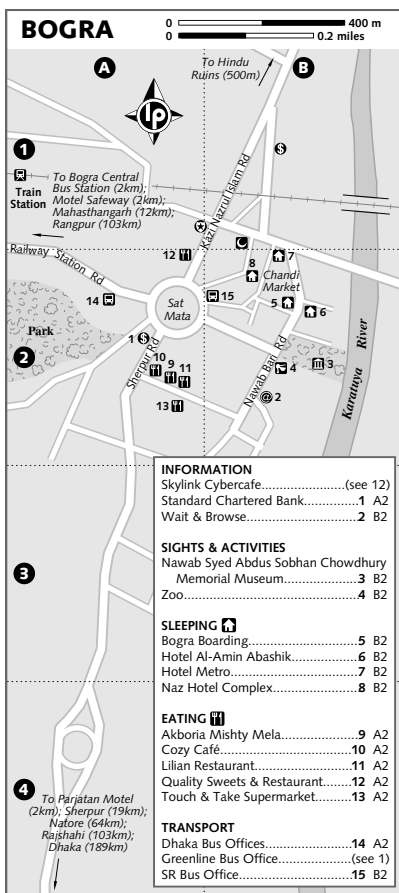
There is a **Standard Chartered Bank** (Sherpur Rd) with an ATM, just visible from Sat Mata. You can hook up with the wider world at the **Skylink Cybercafe** (Kazi Nazrul Islam Rd; per hr Tk 20) just upstairs from the Quality Sweets & Restaurant. More computers are available at **Wait & Browse** (Nawab Bari Rd), just around the corner.

### Sights

Two blocks east of Sat Mata, the **Nawab Syed Abdus Sobhan Chowdhury Memorial Museum** (admission to grounds Tk 10, to museum Tk 5; ☎ 10am–8pm) is one of only a handful of furnished rajbaris in Bangladesh. The mosaic ceiling of the audience hall is impressive, and the rooms have mannequins dressed to impress in both Bengali and British fashions. The last room you'll see is dedicated to modern art – it's a compelling display, but the lack of English explanation leaves it somewhat obscure. Look out also for the rare gharial (a type of crocodilian). We're sure you'll agree that they look far better nailed to the wall here than they would do in the wild...

The grounds of the museum have been turned into a rose- and lover-filled garden (all the lovers appear to help themselves to the roses) and a quirky **amusement park** with rickety fairground rides and charmingly naive statues of peasants, bullock carts and wild animals. In the far corner is a small row of cages containing depressed monkeys with heavy chains around their necks.

Just next to the museum's entrance is a statue 'zoo' of painted cement animals, where you'll find monkeys seeing, hearing and speaking no evil (a first for a monkey), goril-



las shimmying a little sexy salsa and frogs that have outgrown the pandas. The cages these animals live in are often better than those their real-life cousins have to put up with. The real highlight though is the terrifying cave. Hand over your cash (Tk 15) and enter only if you dare!

### Sleeping BUDGET

**Bogra Boarding** (☎ 65609; Nawab Bari Rd; r without bathroom Tk 140, s/d with bathroom Tk 120/160) A three-storey building with an English sign and a charming old gentleman manager. The well-presented green and red rooms are tiny but relatively clean, and come with fans and mosquito nets.

Cheaper and less hygienic beds can also be found at the **Hotel Metro** (Nawab Bari Rd) and the **Naz Hotel Complex**, but neither contain the promise of a delightful night.

#### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hotel Al-Amin Abashik** (☎ 72937; s/d with air-con Tk 500/700, without air-con Tk 300/500) The more expensive rooms have sit-down toilets and more furniture and rooms of all prices come with that ever important mosquito net. If the cleanliness isn't all that you hoped for then ask them to clean it again and they'll quickly, and happily, get it scrubbed up for you. It's down a little mud side street and the sign is in Bengali only, but everyone seems to know where it is.

**Motel Safeway** (☎ 66087; safeway@bogra.desh.net; s/d Tk 990/1280) Gorgeous homely rooms that are some of the cleanest you'll come across in northern Bangladesh, though the bathrooms in the single rooms are cramped. The best thing about this hotel is the thick grassy lawn where you can relax beside the pond. It's a major hike from the town centre but is very handy for the bus station (though far enough away to avoid the noise).

**Parjatan Motel** (☎ 66753; r with/without air-con Tk 1200/750) The large Parjatan Motel comes with bird noise at the back and road noise at the front. Rooms are kept clean and have little balconies, but wear and tear is just beginning to make its presence felt. The price is absolutely right and the attached restaurant good news. The Parjatan is a long way south of the centre, but this gives plenty of room to breathe. To get into town just hop into any passing tempo (auto-rickshaw; Tk 5 to Sat Mata).

#### Eating

**Quality Sweets & Restaurant** (Kazi Nazrul Islam Rd; mains Tk 50) The Quality Sweets & Restaurant is overflowing with both character and drool inspiring food. It's tucked down a little alley off the main drag – there's no exterior English sign, but there is a small sign in English beside the interior door. The dhal here is especially good and much thicker than is normal in Bangladesh. Its sweet selection is deserving of the name.

**Akboria Mishty Mela** (☎ 9am-9pm; mains Tk 50) A kickback café with a range of sickly-sweet Bengali cakes and almost equally sweet Western cakes. It also delves into coffee and

light snacks, and Chinese meals are dished out upstairs.

**Parjatan Motel** (☎ 66753; mains Tk 160) It's nothing special but if you're staying here and can't face the long trek into town then you'll be pleased to know that the Bangladeshi and Chinese dishes at the Parjatan are satisfying.

**Lilian Restaurant** (☎ 61800; mains Tk 180) Small, intimate and a good place for a more drawn out Chinese or Thai meal. It's close to the Akboria Mishty Mela.

**Cozy Café** (☎ 00610; Sherpur Rd; mains Tk 180) The Cozy Café, where the young of the town come to see and be seen, is Bogra's trendiest eating experience and is very much a new concept for Bogra. The décor is dark and cool, the Chinese dishes really delicious, the staff will be genuinely pleased to see you and, if another reason were needed to stop by, they have a music collection that includes such old-school 'classics' as Bon Jovi, Europe and A-ha!

Finally, at the **Touch & Take Supermarket** you can stock up on hard-to-come-by food-stuffs and toiletries; unfortunately, despite the name, you do have to pay for items.

#### Getting There & Away

##### BUS

Buses usually arrive at Bogra's central bus station, 2km northwest of town at the junction of the Rangpur Bypass road and the road to Naogaon (close to the Motel Safeway). From here it's a Tk 10 rickshaw ride into town.

Ordinary buses travel to Dhaka (Tk 120, 4½ hours) via the Bangabandhu Bridge. Most coach offices for buses to Dhaka are west of Sat Mata, but the Green Line bus office is just to the south of Sat Mata. Deluxe air-con buses cost between Tk 350.

Buses leave the central station throughout the day for Natore (Tk 30, 2½ hours) and Rajshahi (Tk 70, three hours). There are several buses to Khulna (Tk 200, 8½ hours, depart around 9am) and Rangpur (Tk 60, 2½ hours, every 20 minutes from 5.30am to 6pm). Travellers to Paharpur can take regular buses throughout the day to Jaipurhat (Tk 50, 1½ hours) and a tempo or bus (Tk 10) on to Paharpur. Buses also run to Mahasthan (Tk 10, 30 minutes, 11km).

##### TRAIN

Bogra doesn't have great train connections and most people take the bus, but there is one train a day to Dhaka (1st/sulob class Tk

320/215, 1.07pm daily except Saturday) which arrives in Dhaka at 8.20pm, and a night train departing at 9.56pm nightly except Monday.

There are no direct trains from Bogra to Dinajpur or Rajshahi.

## AROUND BOGRA

### Sariakandi

For a bit of good adventure, consider heading 20km east via Gabtali (General Zia's home town) to Sariakandi and hiring a motorised boat to take you out onto the Jamuna River. It will cost around Tk 50 for half an hour. During the monsoonal season you can see broken embankments, and people living on the tiny islands created by the massive annual flooding.

The banks of the Jamuna are about the most erosion-prone places in the country, forcing farmers off their land during flood season. Many dispossessed farmers join the ranks of the rickshaw-wallahs.

### Hat Bazar

Every Friday in a village just south of Bogra there's a hat bazar, a small open-air market that attracts so many people that they spill onto the highway. Roaming around the bazar can be great fun.

## MAHASTHANGARH

The oldest known city in Bangladesh, dating back to at least the 3rd century BC, Mahasthangarh (an easy half-day trip from Bogra) is an archaeological site consisting largely of foundations and hillocks hinting at past riches.

The principal site, the Citadel, contains traces of the ancient city. Many other sites in the vicinity are lumped together under the name Mahasthangarh. The whole area is rich in Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim sites, but most have all but vanished. The Buddhists were here until at least the 11th century; their most glorious period was the 8th to the 11th centuries, when the Buddhist Pala emperors of North Bengal ruled. It is from this period that most of the visible remains belong.

### Sights

#### MAHASTHANGARH SITE MUSEUM

This small but well-maintained museum (admission Tk 50; ☎ 2.30-6pm Mon, 10am-1pm & 1.30-6pm Tue-Thu & Sat, 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Fri Apr-Sep, 1.30-5pm Mon, 9am-1pm & 1.30-5pm Tue-Thu & Sat, 9am-12.30pm & 2-5pm

Fri Oct-Mar) has a lively set of objects discovered in the antique rich surroundings.

The highlights are the statues of Hindu gods, terracotta plaques depicting scenes from daily life and some well-preserved bronze images mostly found in monasteries from the Pala period. Other notable objects are the necklaces that look just like those sold in hippy markets all over the West and the fragments of toilet seats – they certainly don't make them like that anymore! The gardens are an attraction in their own right.

### THE CITADEL

Adjacent to the museum, the **Citadel** forms a rough rectangle covering more than 2 sq km. It was once surrounded on three sides by the mighty Karatuya River. Hindus still make an annual pilgrimage to the Karatuya River in mid-April.

Probably first constructed under the Mauryan empire in the 3rd century BC, the site shows evidence of various Hindu empires, and Buddhist and Muslim occupations (though it's doubtful the helipad dates back that far). The Citadel fell into disuse around the time of the Mughal invasions. Most of the visible brickwork dates from the 8th century, apart from that added during restoration. Nowadays there isn't a lot left to see aside from the edge of the exterior walls and various unidentifiable grassy mounds. However, it's a perfect place for a walk and a picnic. The Citadel's interior is used as both agricultural land and a leisure area, with cricket matches taking place in the cool evening light. If cricket isn't your cup of tea then there will be plenty of other people around (some with flasks of tea) who will be keen to pass the time of day with you.

Outside the Citadel, opposite the museum, the remains of a 6th-century **Govinda Bhita Hindu Temple** (admission Tk 20) overlook a picturesque bend in the river. The temple, which looks like a broken-down step pyramid, is a quiet spot to get away from everyone. Opening hours are as for the Mahasthangarh Site Museum.

Back in the drab little town of Mahasthan (1.7km from Mahasthangarh) there is a small **Muslim shrine** that every other person will try to lead you to when you step off the bus – it's very missable! There are further **ancient sites** in the nearby countryside and any rickshaw-wallah will be keen as mustard to whip together a tour for you (around Tk 150).