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ACCOMMODATION

There are international-standard hotels in Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet, but most accommodation is well down the price scale.

Couples, married or not, shouldn't plan a dirty weekend in Bangladesh. Most midrange and top-end hotels will have no problems with you sharing a room, but most of the time you'll find it contains only two single beds. Some budget hotels refuse to allow unmarried couples to stay and many of them are not very welcoming to single women travellers. If you are in a couple (married or not) and one of you is of Bangladeshi or Indian descent, you may well have trouble getting a room of any description in any hotel – including in some of Dhaka's most expensive establishments!

PRACTICALITIES

- The *Daily Star's* supplementary magazine on Fridays is a good source of information on what's going on in Dhaka.
- Almost every hotel TV is satellite TV.
- Electricity (when there is electricity) is 220V, 50 Hz AC and is either a two-pronged connection with round rather than flat holes or a three-pin UK-style plug but rounder and with thicker pins.
- Officially Bangladesh is metric, but some local measures are still used. For instance, a *seer* equals 850g and a *maund* is 37kg. Yards are interchanged with metres, and miles are often confused with kilometres.

Prices are often characterised as 'with air-con' or 'without air-con'; the latter is often significantly cheaper and usually less appealing. Outside of this major distinction, prices vary according to whether there is a TV and/or an attached bathroom. It's rarely necessary to book rooms in advance. Note that in the bigger cities it's often easy to negotiate room discounts of up to 50% on the better-class hotels. In this guide, rates are generally broken down into budget (under Tk 500 for a double), midrange (Tk 500 to Tk 1000) and top end (over Tk 1000).

Government Rest Houses & Circuit Houses

There are government rest houses and circuit houses in every district. They aren't officially accessible to travellers, but the district commissioner may let you stay if there are few alternative options around.

The Archaeology Department has rest houses at Paharpur, Mainimati and Mahasthan. Rooms are basic but cheap at typically Tk 200 for a double.

Hotels

The word 'hotel' denotes a hotel or restaurant; the correct term for a hotel is 'residential hotel'. Lower-end establishments often make

this distinction on their signs, and you'll avoid confusion if you use this term when asking for directions.

Many hotels don't have English signs and some buildings look like hotels but aren't. You'll save yourself time and trouble if you learn to recognise the word 'hotel' in Bengali script (see p191).

Absolute bottom-end accommodation usually consists of a tiny room with fan, shared bathroom and maybe mosquito nets. This typically costs around Tk 80/120 for a single/double. Apart from space and hygiene deficiencies, these places often refuse to accept foreigners.

Midrange hotels are better value and there is an increasing number of them. Expect to pay from Tk 400/600 (or more in Dhaka) for a single/double with attached bathroom. For this you will usually get a small room with a reasonably soft bed, and a clean bathroom with a cold shower. Double this price and you're into the upper midrange or lower top-end class of hotel and can expect a large room, soft beds without too many nasty stains, hot water and sit-down toilets.

ACTIVITIES

Cycling

Bangladesh's lazy terrain makes it an ideal place for cycling. Even the slightly more hilly areas aren't arduous, they're just scenic. Good places for cycling include Srimangal (p154) in Sylhet division and Thakurgaon in Rajshahi division.

For information about cycling in general, see p173.

Hiking

The best places to do some hiking are forest reserves and national parks. Some, like Satchari National Park (p156) and Lowacherra National Park (p154) in Sylhet division, have hiking trails marked out and offer magical jungle experiences.

Unquestionably the best place for fully fledged hikes is the Chittagong Hill Tracts (p129), particularly around Bandarban. For the moment at least, the security situation prevents anything much more taxing than gentle day hikes, but a little determination and preplanning might open up multiday sensory-overload treks. The Adivasis (tribal people) in this area are considerably more hospitable than the central government likes

to give them credit for, and the landscape in which they live is unforgettable.

River Trips

To come to Bangladesh and not travel by boat down a swampy river is like going to Paris and not suffering from a look of utter disdain from a snooty waiter. It's not just inconceivable – it's plain old wrong! Although river trips in Bangladesh are unavoidable if you're doing any sort of extensive travel, it's also worth putting in the effort to do a good one. There are some river trips you can do around Dhaka either independently or through an organised tour company. See p59 for details.

The ultimate boat ride in Bangladesh is a journey on the Rocket. This crazy ferry ride between Dhaka and Khulna via Barisal isn't for the light-hearted but it's the stuff that legendary travel stories are made of. See p175 for more details.

Surfing

It's not Hawaii but for the most adventurous of wave riders surprisingly consistent beach breaks can be found between Cox's Bazar and St Martin's Island. The most consistent time of year is during the monsoon, but you'll need to rise early to beat the daily onshore winds. The best overall time is late September/early October when swells will be consistent, wind patterns more favourable and temperatures pleasant. Almost no foreigners have surfed in Bangladesh but you might be surprised to learn that there is a small Bangladeshi surf community around Cox's Bazar who even hold a fun contest in late October, which includes a Bangladeshi women's division – this country never fails to surprise! For more on Bangladeshi surfing, keep an eye on www.oceansurfpublications.co.uk.

BUSINESS HOURS

Unlike in most South Asian countries, business hours are strictly adhered to in Bangladesh and you shouldn't expect to get anything done on Friday, which is the official day off. Banking hours from Saturday to Wednesday are 9am to 3pm, and on Thursday 9am until 2pm. Select ATMs, like those attached to Standard Chartered Bank, Dutch-Bangla Bank or the less common HSBC, are open 24 hours or at least until very late.

Government offices are open Saturday to Thursday from 9am until 2pm. Private busi-

nesses generally operate between 9am and 5pm (closed Friday), while shops, including bazars, tend to be open from 9am or 10am to 8pm or 10pm. Some shops and bazars are open for half a day on Friday.

CHILDREN

Travelling with young children in Bangladesh would be very tough and child-care facilities are almost zero. However, Bangladeshis are fascinated by foreign children and everyone will go out of their way to help. You will have a constant queue of would-be nannies wanting to take your child under their wing.

From a health standpoint, dishes of boiled rice and unspiced *dahl* (yellow lentils), scrambled or boiled eggs, oatmeal and a variety of fruits and vegetables should be enough to keep kids happy.

You'll be hard pressed coming across high-chairs and nappy-changing facilities, but formula and disposable nappies can be found at some supermarkets in towns and cities.

Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* is a collection of experiences from travelling families, and includes practical advice on how to avoid hassles and have a fun travel experience with kids.

CLIMATE CHARTS

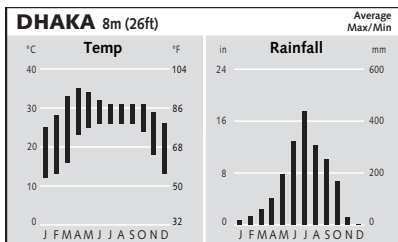
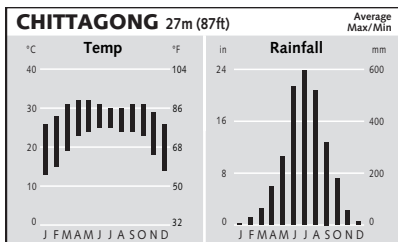
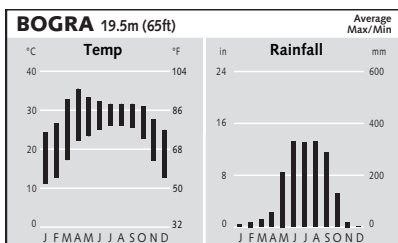
The climate in Bangladesh is dramatic, to say the least. It is subtropical and tropical with temperatures ranging from as low as 3°C overnight in the cold season to a daytime top of above 40°C in the hot season. Annual rainfall varies from 1000mm in the west to 2500mm in the southeast, and up to 5000mm in the north, near the hills of Assam.

Three-quarters of the annual rainfall occurs between June and September. The 90% to 95% humidity in this season is almost unbearable.

In the cold season the weather is drier and fresh, with average daytime temperatures of 24°C. Rainfall is negligible, although even in winter a brief shower may come along.

While early March can still be pleasant, by April, as the monsoon approaches, humidity increases and lethal hailstorms aren't uncommon. The monsoon season usually starts between late May and mid-June. It doesn't rain solidly all day – there tends to be an initial downpour, followed by clear skies. You should avoid visiting at this time of year!

See also When to Go (p12).



COURSES

The best places for learning Bengali are the **Effective Bangla Learning Centre** (EBLC; Map p62; ☎ 1710 926392; www.eblcbd.com; House 16A, Rd 25A, Banani, Dhaka) and **HEED** (Health, Education, Economic Development; Map p62; ☎ 881 2390, 989 6028; hlc@agni.com; House 104, Rd 12, Block E, Banani, Dhaka).

CUSTOMS

The usual '200 cigarettes, 1L of alcohol' rule applies, though a relatively casual approach is employed at border crossings. Foreigners are permitted to bring in US\$5000 without declaring it and Bangladeshis can bring in US\$2500.

On departure, tourists are allowed to reconvert 25% of the total foreign currency encashed in the country. This is only possible at the airport in Dhaka, and you will need to have your encashment slips with you as proof.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Bangladesh generally receives a rough ride in the Western press and many people regard it as a dangerously unstable country. The truth couldn't be further away from this and by and large Bangladesh is overwhelmingly friendly and hospitable. The biggest annoyance you will probably have to face is unabating friendliness – interested crowds are everywhere and questions about your nationality, religion and marital status never cease.

Having said that, there are some very rare but very real dangers in Bangladesh; foreigners have been robbed, raped and kidnapped.

Pickpocketing on crowded buses is not as endemic as in some other Asian countries, but armed robbery on buses, particularly at night and using crude weapons such as knives, acid bulbs and home-made shotguns, does take place. Try to travel in daylight hours only. A number of foreigners have been mugged, often at gunpoint, in the Gulshan area of Dhaka – be careful after dark. There have also been reports of theft committed by both touts and officials at both Dhaka and Sylhet airports. Keep a very close eye on your passport and other papers here. Rickshaws and taxis present all manner of theft and mugging opportunities, and women especially should be extremely careful of any taxi containing a driver and his 'friend'.

We have had some rare reports of harassment of foreigners in the form of pushing, stone throwing and spitting, but such incidents are very uncommon.

There are also ripples of terrorist activity, targeted assassinations, politically motivated attacks and, sometimes, violent religious rivalry. The latest attack at the time of writing was in May 2007, when bombs exploded at train stations in Dhaka, Sylhet and Chittagong though there were no fatalities. There have been a number of similar attacks in recent years that have seen four people killed. However, between late November and early December 2005 a number of bomb attacks took place across the country that left 23 people dead and 144 injured. Foreigners have never been targeted in these incidents, but many travel advisories warn foreign nationals to stay away from large gatherings to cut down on the 'wrong place, wrong time' possibility.

Foreigners are more likely to get tangled up in a hartal (strike). These frequently turn violent and many people have been killed or

seriously injured as a result. The National Day of Mourning (21 February) is a potentially chaotic day (see opposite). Major riots, affecting many towns, took place in August 2007 resulting in deaths and many injuries. A curfew was enforced in many problem areas including Dhaka. This has since been lifted but at the time of writing a state of emergency, originally imposed in January 2007, was still being enforced (see p24 for more information). However, it has to be said that this will have no effect on your travel plans and most foreigners aren't even aware of it.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (p129) is the only part of the country where you need really worry for your safety, and even here the problem areas are out of bounds to foreign tourists.

To sum up, the military-backed caretaker government has done much to ease tensions in Bangladesh and improve both the security and corruption situation, and in all honesty the biggest danger you face is from being involved in a road accident. Even so, it pays to keep yourself informed as to what's going on by regularly consulting travel advisories and newspapers.

Also see Dangers & Annoyances in the Dhaka chapter (p50).

Scams

Tourism has not really established itself in Bangladesh, and neither have tourist-related scams. You might actually be surprised at the sheer honesty of most people. However, as with anywhere in the world, not everyone is a good guy.

The most common scam you will encounter is short-changing for small transactions. The best guard against this is vigilance when you're receiving change, or a polite query about unlikely restaurant bills. A similar scam is bus boys conveniently 'forgetting' to give you your change, even though they have a fistful of taka. Nine times out of 10 you're more likely to be chased because *you've* forgotten, but keep this at the back of your mind.

Some travellers have reported being approached by dubious charities, initially appearing legitimate. Some professional beggars wave fraudulent or at least out-of-date pharmaceutical prescriptions asking for assistance in purchasing medicine for children.

Finally, there are the usual hassles with rickshaw, baby taxi (mini three-wheeled autorickshaws) and taxi drivers, though even here